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I BECAME THE ACADEMY'S DISABLED STUDENT

– 아카데미 장애인 전형 생도가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 1 -

-AUTHOR-
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[GALAXYTL]

– STORY –

I created a game character.
Instead of taking several perks, I added restrictions.

▸Restriction (I): “Curse of Sensory Seal”
—Permanently seals a chosen sense.
—Choice: Sight, Taste, Smell

▸Restriction (II): “Curse of Short Life”
—You are born with a body doomed to a short life.

▸Restriction (III): “Curse of Silence”
—Speaking causes you pain.

When the next day came, I couldn’t see anything.

– GENRE –

Action Adventure Fantasy Harem School Life

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CHAPTER 1
NO, MY EYES

– Aaaaargh!

– Die…! You filthy demon—!

[HP 12/3155]

.

.

– Why are you guys here…!

– Did you think you'd get away with that kind of trickery?

[HP 2/3155]

.

.

– Wait…!

– This is the end—!

[HP 0…

[Your HP has reached 0.]

[The player has died.]

[Bad End 34 – Died in the 'True Dungeon'.]

[Calculating data…

“Gyaaah…”

Blink blink.

Holding my head in my hands, I stared at the screen that signaled game-over through the flickering darkness.

My head pulled back as if by a force, my vision floating away.

Savior, a roguelike game by the name, had no such features like ‘save’ or ‘load.’

Once a character dies, it’s over.

‘My, my 100 hours… ends like this?’

The harsh reality made the corners of my eyes tremble. The emotions I could hardly control spread throughout my body.

Unable to contain my fury, I swung my hands through the air and thumped it down on the desk.

“Uhk…”

The sharp pain blurred my vision before it whipped back.

Ah, it hurts…

Physical therapy in the form of jolting pain that abruptly brought back my cloudy mind.

My waist twisted reflexively from the tingling pain in my elbow. After flailing meaninglessly for a while, mid-flail, I was hit with reality check and slumped over in my chair.

Even by my own standards, it was an embarrassing sight.

If someone else had seen, it would have been enough to inflict mental harm for nearly a month.

“Sigh…”

Rubbing my sore elbow, I turned to my monitor.

The monitor still nastily displayed the bad end tag, showing my character now cooling off.

12th iteration character 〈Hybrid Summoner〉

It was a strategy that pushed forward using a sheer numbers advantage, a combination of summoning multiple minions and necromancy from the school of dark magic.

It was an effective strategy. Compared to previous runs, I had been breezing through the main story far more easily. I thought maybe this time I would see a happy ending.

A character nurtured with painstaking care, taking lessons from 12 failures.

While I didn't consider myself invincible, I certainly expected to breeze through at least a few chapters given its growth…

But it ended miserably. I just walked into a no-strings-attached dungeon and got caught in a trap event, died miserably.

And I died even earlier than the last run.

Was it a mistake to go down the dark magic path?

It did cause all surrounding NPCs to hate me early on, but it wasn't a big issue. From midway Through each run, it was all about solo play.

That bad karma just struck me.

The main characters joined hands and threw my character into the dungeon. They meticulously lured me in and then in the midst of an overwhelming monster infestation, they cut my throat cleanly.

Incredibly unfair. What did I do wrong?

I just wanted to dabble in a bit black magic, so I consumed an NPC from a poor country. The damage to the main characters was nothing…

Moreover, due to the summoner's route, the original body was weak and too easily caught off-guard. If I had upgraded my own stats a bit more, it wouldn't have ended so needlessly.

'But to raise stats… '

The stats of the character itself?

The 11th iteration 〈Indomitable Warrior〉 did last longer, focusing all on character stats, but in the end, I got beaten and became monster food.

Staring intensely at the bad ending screen, I fell into deep thought.

'…No, it's all wrong.'

After a long contemplation, an epiphany flashed through my mind. I could see the answer waving its hands in the distance.

"Summoners, huh? The whole thinking process was flawed from the start."

To think, a summoner? Just summon a bunch of underlings and watch from behind?

It was cowardly thinking. That's a rotten mindset that just died in the trap event.

But was the previous 11th iteration 〈Indomitable Warrior〉 route successful? No. This guy also couldn't react when buried in reverse events and died.

When traditional breakthrough methods prove impossible, you seek alternative variables.

Click-

I closed the bad ending window and clicked on a new game.

There was plenty of game content left to enjoy, but I wanted to experience something more distinctive.

[Creating character (13th iteration)]

[Please enter the player's name…]

Click- click-

Scroll down.

Name, traits, origins…

‘There it is.’

[Restrictions]

Equivalent exchange or give and take, that’s one way to understand the system.

You give your character one restriction in exchange for a corresponding special advantage.

It’s a common setup in other games and comics I’ve seen before.

Initially, I shied away from touching restrictions because they all seemed weird, and I was an inexperienced newbie.

But now I had accumulated enough experience. Around 12 iterations should be enough to start understanding the ins and outs, right?

When I started playing, due to personal preference, I tasted the vanilla game before enjoying add-ons like DLC, so restriction was an aspect I pushed to the back.

In fact, ever since I had first seen the element of restriction, I had some ideas in mind.

I scrolled the mouse wheel to find a preconceived restriction.

You can choose up to three restrictions.

▸Restriction (Ⅰ): “Curse of Sensory Seal”

—Permanently seal a chosen sense.

—Choices: Vision, Taste, Smell

Blinded, unable to taste, and cannot smell.

▸Restriction (Ⅱ): “Curse of Short Life”

—You are born with a body destined for an early death.

Dying before living a long life. In other words, a short life.

▸Restriction (Ⅲ): “Curse of Silence”

—Speaking comes with pain.

Even communication, a basic interaction, becomes difficult.

“Hmm.”

A breath-stopping lineup. If it were real life, I wouldn’t be able to live with those conditions.

My happiness comes from YouTube (vision), food (taste), and the smell of grass (smell), but if all that is taken away, it would just be easier to die.

And not much communication, even if I could just bear it, dying of natural causes isn’t far off.

Of course, in the game, it just means a huge drop in sensory stats, decrease in interactions with characters, and reduced life span.

Now come the special advantages.

▹Ability (Ⅰ): “Spatial Perception”

— You possess overwhelming spatial awareness.

In exchange for losing sight, you maneuver by directly feeling the space around you.

▹Ability (Ⅱ): “Magic Affinity”

—You have a nonstandard affinity for magic.

Whether wielding a sword, thrusting a spear, casting spells, or creating something. In a world where everything demands magic power, you acquire a highly rare magic

affinity.

▷Ability (Ⅲ): “Jack of All Trades”

—You possess above-average qualities in various fields.

Aiming for solo play, you go for an all-rounder: high peaks might drop, but the lows across the board rise. With enough proficiency, there’ll be nothing you can’t handle alone.

‘This should be all right.’

I reviewed the restrictions and abilities for a while and nodded my head.

No use getting full on the first spoonful. I shelved the thought of seeing a happy ending on the first try. It’d take a few attempts and re-designs for sure.

But there was no helping the anticipation for the performance of whatever capabilities I’d gain.

The abilities I’d gain as benefits would all be placed in the ‘Unique Abilities’ section.

In the game settings, it’s common law that innate unique abilities are typically limited to one.

But with a restriction tacked on at character creation, a player character is born with three innate unique abilities, instead of the usual one.

Even with the previous iterations, characters started with just one unique ability made decent headway.

〈Indomitable Warrior〉 just by itself reached specs capable of seizing victory in a 3 to 1 against the strongest protagonist of the lore.

So how far can a character with three abilities go?

Feeling the pounding of my eager heart, I move the mouse cursor over to sta… rt……

…

“Hm…”

What is this feeling? It feels like sweat is running down the back of my neck.

No, it’s not just a feeling.

When I touched my neck, it came back drenched with sweat.

Real sweat is pouring like rain. The creeping sensation made my body quiver.

Something’s ominous. Something’s off.

Barely managing to move the cursor with my trembling hand, that strange feeling faded.

“…What’s this?”

The cursor shakes and quivers as I move it to ‘Start Game,’ but then it returns to normal once I stop.

My whole body? No, it’s as if something instinctive is foaming at the mouth, warning me not to start the game.

“…Should I do it tomorrow?”

There’s no rush, anyway.

And, after all, the selection was a bit too hasty, wasn’t it?

Muttering excuses to no one in particular, I got up from my chair.

Tomorrow’s Monday, but I’m essentially jobless, so there’s no work anyway.

Hastily tidied up the desk and took a quick shower.

I still felt weak, so opting to hit the sack early seemed wise.

I closed the curtains and placed a vanilla-scented diffuser by the bed before sinking into the mattress.

Closing my eyes tightly to escape the unease, the vanilla scent lingered at the tip of my nose, ushering in drowsiness.

Consciousness soon faded away into sleep.

.

.

.

.

The next day, I woke up in the world of the game.

But damn it, I can’t see anything.

CHAPTER 2
THE FIRST ORDEAL

While determining the constraints, I made a jest to myself.

I thought that if I lost my sight, taste, smell, couldn't speak, and lived a life marked by an expiration date, I might just die off.

How could one possibly live normally? I joked that it might actually be a blessing to be euthanized peacefully without the ability to watch YouTube, taste delicious food, or smell the scent of flowers.

Yeah.

It was just a joke.

Just what would I do if my game character experienced all this? It was nothing more than a fleeting fancy, a speck of dust of imagination. I didn't think for a second that it would actually happen while I was chiding myself for such thoughts.

But it happened.

I had entered the world within the game.

If you ask why I felt this way, there's only one answer I could give.

I just knew. Upon waking up, I inexplicably found myself certain that this place was the world within the game, despite the lack of any concrete evidence—just this strange conviction.

And despite opening my eyes, I couldn't see anything. My body felt foreign, and I lacked strength. I could sense intangible… somethings swirling endlessly around me.

And then.

'Aaaaaah—!!'

An unimaginable agony, daring not to be compared to any headache I'd ever had, scalded my brain as if molten metal were being poured into an open skull.

I've never been the pinnacle of health, but at least my life wasn't so pitifully harsh to deserve pity.

I had never felt such pain.

It was beyond my meager tolerance. Writhing as if being ejected from the bed, my mouth involuntarily opened, and a scream erupted.

'What, what is this…!'

I could see myself convulsing. The bed where I lay, the bedside table, the desk, and the monitor, all of which were different in make and placement. The insides of the computer's central unit, the building's steel and cement…

The steel framework and electrical wires inside the walls, the appearance of the neighboring house beyond those walls.

The flickering traffic lights, the reflections in glass windows under the sun, the swaying leaves of street trees, the people walking down the road.

Their insides, their skeletons, bundles of muscles, organs, the spread of their blood vessels…

'Aargh…!'

A barrage of information about everything within a spherical area with me at the center crammed directly into my brain.

I don't know this sensation. Having lived a lifetime receiving information through my eyes, never once had I experienced such a thing.

Every time this unending wave of information hammered my brain, a stabbing pain pierced my head as if by an awl.

'Aaaaargh—!'

Nothing came out. My mouth had opened. Surely I had tried to scream. But each

time, my throat would close up and the agonizing sensation would intensify.

'Why, why is this happening? Why does it hurt so much?'

Even as I writhed in pain, thoughts continued to race without end.

The answer was quickly surmised.

Something spherical, centered on me… every detail within that range was discerned.

This must be the spatial perception ability I'd chosen.

It matched the description of spatial perception I had seen within the game.

The claim that one possesses overwhelmingly powerful spatial awareness.

From the human perspective, with only a couple of eyes, acquiring all information directly within a sphere centered around oneself is an absurd advantage.

Especially so on the frontlines of close-quarters combat.

However, the problem is that my brain isn't superior enough to process the information provided by that spatial awareness.

To put it simply, there's too much information being crammed and my brain is signaling danger.

And then, there was something more ethereal and flowing, gathering in one place then dispersing elsewhere, a definitely existent but intangible something.

This must be magic power. It's the first time I'm sensing this energy and information. Once this too fell under the range of my spatial perception, it compounded the pain.

But because it's my first time processing such information, my brain does not know how to cut it off. Hence, this vicious cycle of continuous pain repeats.

'This, this bullshit…!!'

And it wasn't just that.

I wasn't the kind of great person who could endure brain-scratching pain; I had to open my mouth and let a scream escape, but besides the abilities 'Spatial Perception' and 'Magic Affinity,' I had another restriction.

'Curse of Silence'

A constraint simply described as having difficulty speaking, just a minor reduction in interactions.

The screams don't come out. Because screams are, in the end, also sounds produced by the mouth.

Because of the 'Curse of Silence,' all 'speech' is forcibly halted immediately before it escapes.

The problem is that speech doesn't just stop gently.

It's forcibly halted with pain inflicted on the throat.

It feels as if someone is scraping at my throat with a knife.

On top of the headache, I feel the pain as if my throat is being gouged out.

So.

Spatial perception receives information.

↓

The brain suffers pain because of excessive information.

↓

However, my novice brain doesn't know how to filter information, so pain persists.

↓

Pain causes a scream to burst out.

↓

Due to ‘Curse of Silence,’ pain is inflicted on the throat.

This state continues. The cycle of pain repeats. Inaudible screams are swallowed again and again.

‘I’m going to die.’

It feels like I might actually die of shock. With such intense suffering, it’s normal to pass out sooner, but curiously, I haven’t fainted.

Before long, I found myself crawling on the floor. Writhing like an insect, I was in agony.

‘I’m going to die.’

I can’t cry out for help because I have no voice. If I could just let out a loud scream, help might arrive from somewhere.

My phone? I couldn’t see it inside the house. In my current state, I can barely even crawl on the floor.

‘I’m… dying.’

The debate about euthanasia isn’t for nothing. Being alive can sometimes be a pain. That’s why one might even wish for death, right?

That’s the situation I’m in. Barely even five minutes have passed, but it feels as if my brain is cooking. The pain that’s inflicted on my throat now feels as if my neck is worn ragged.

It’s almost as if my head is being torn straight off. I would rather be torn up and just die…

If I just died like this…

…

‘I don’t… want that.’

It hurt enough to want to die. Yet, when the moment came, I didn’t want to die.

Though the pain made me feel like dying was better, as my consciousness began to blur, a contrary feeling washed over me—I didn't want to die.

There's so much more I want to do.

I haven't even lived half of a half of a century yet.

'Think.'

Pain in the throat. Screaming triggers the activation of 'Curse of Silence.'

I am screaming because my brain feels like it's burning.

My brain is hurting because there's too much information from spatial perception.

'That's it.'

Spatial perception is the problem. If I manage to take care of this bastard, the catalyst for the chain reaction disappears.

I need to do something about spatial perception. Reduce the range drastically or let the information flow out.

I focus.

I will the spatial perception to diminish, to disappear and to just let the information flow by.

As I hope to ignore useless, inconsequential things like dust in the corner, the spatial perception quivers unstably for an instant.

Soon enough, the perfectly spherical space perception started to crumple and fold like a piece of paper, then stretch out again and again.

Triangles, squares, pentagons—shapes morphing into unnameable objects then crumpling and flattening out once more.

The vision that seemingly processed every single cell switched to one seen from the sky above, then to a view as if through night-vision goggles.

'…!…!…!!'

As the volume of information increased exponentially with each change, my consciousness finally snapped.

* * *

'That was ten days ago.'

Thinking back on it now, it still sends shivers down my spine.

Being unfairly thrown into the game was aggravating enough, but to almost die upon arrival?

If I had perished in such a manner, there's no way I would have found peace in the afterlife.

Regardless, after I fainted, I didn't come to until I had been out cold for three whole days.

Had there been no voice alarm on that old clock, I wouldn't have had any clue how long I'd been unconscious.

'Phew… '

While soothing my raging insides, I tuned the spatial perception—a range barely enough to make out my room. The diameter must be about 5 meters or so, give or take.

Thanks to the excruciating pain, memories were hazy, but considering that it was roughly 100 meters in diameter when it first manifested, I had managed to shrink it down to 1/20th of its original size.

Perhaps consciously or subconsciously, the process of reducing incoming information started by minimizing the range.

Maybe it's like when a company's in trouble and they start cutting labor costs first.

Trouble is, cost-reduction didn't stop there.

I heaved an internal sigh as I surveyed the world as perceived by my spatial awareness.

A world monochromatic in black. Physical matters were represented solely by surfaces in shades of green.

The display resembled that of a military radar seen in the media, a combination of colors and forms similar to that. I wonder if this is the kind of sensation a bat feels when perceiving the world with ultrasonic waves.

Compared to the initial spatial perception that voraciously absorbed all information within its range, it has now excessively shrunk down in scale.

Back then, it even captured information like the result cells in the muscles of my body, even beyond a single speck of dust, but now I can only make out the surfaces.

Moreover, it was fixed in this state and it wouldn't even change.

I can adjust the size somewhat, reducing and enlarging it.

But being constantly aware of spatial perception, frankly, I feel like I might get neurosis.

'F**k… '

When I first… no, when I woke up three days after fainting, imagine the shock.

As soon as I woke up, I honestly thought I was going to die when I felt my belly stick to my back.

Thinking about how, after almost exploding my brain with pain, I almost died again from hunger and dehydration, still gives me the creeps.

They say survival is only possible for three days without water… I was moments away from becoming a real mummy.

Strange to say, I know.

Wherever this place is, surely there must be some kind of consumable food at home.

Even if there weren't any, I could just go out and buy some.

The problem is that I can only see outlines, so I'm incapable of distinguishing what is what.

Imagine the experience of having to grope and crawl around with a belly stuck to the skin, driven by the terror of possibly dying of starvation or heat exposure.

'I feel like I'm going to get PTSD.'

I seriously think I might go insane…

Even now my head hurts, though not as much as ten days ago… But in the past, it would have been just enough for me to freak out and roll around in agony.

To think I've gained a tolerance to this sort of discomfort is crazy.

Heaving a deep sigh, I looked over at… rather, sensed the table.

On the table was a delivery box, containing a few sheets of paper and a device resembling a watch.

Obviously, being blind as a bat, I couldn't see the package. If the delivery person hadn't informed me where it came from, I wouldn't have known its origin.

'Notice of special admission to Shio-ram'

Shio-ram.

The main stage for part one of the main storyline in the novel.

An island placed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, with the Tower of Growth at its center, it's the world's top-notch institution for the nurturing of superhumans.

A facility that combines magic with the latest science and technology.

And high-quality lectures were conducted by active and retired world-class superhumans.

Not to mention countless other features that make Shio-ram an institution

introduced as the world's best without any shortage in accolades.

About 600 cadets are admitted each year.

Of those, 90% pass through regular exams, while 10% are admitted with the recommendations of influential external forces and internal professors of Shio-ram.

The former and the latter are both legitimate methods of enrolment, but there's also 'special admission.'

Special admittees don't need to take exams. They don't need a powerful backing force. Nor have they been recommended by internal professors.

They just need to show up.

'Haah… '

If this were a game, it would simply be seen as a setup for the player to enter the stage… but contemplating this as reality is a bit grim.

The problem is my current state as the person specially and oh-so specially supposed to enrol through this special admission.

With a mind throbbing constantly from spatial perception and a mouth that pays a price for even a little babbling, I'm a mute.

At the same time, I'm a blind man who cannot see properly and a terminally ill person who'd be lucky to live another 10 years.

The sensory deprivation of taste and smell is a bonus.

Here's the state of affairs for me.

As an institution boasting the world's highest standards, the level of its lectures is bound to be nothing short of that.

Before considering enrolling, the question is if I can handle its difficulty.

'…… '

But the answer is decided.

'…I have to go.'

Do I have the confidence to endure awful conditions and eventually succeed? No, I never was someone brimming with self-confidence.

I was someone whose joy in life was to watch YouTube, nibble on tasty treats, sip drinks, and grow plants on the balcony.

Even if I have abilities like spatial perception, Jack of All Trades, and magic affinity, at the core, I'm still a lone nerd, an internet addict.

Yet, I still have to go.

Before coming to this world. The thoughts I had while setting my character's constraints.

Saying that if I have to live my whole life without YouTube, without being able to taste food or smell anything, why bother living at all.

I still hold that thought. I think it would be better to just die than live like that.

But I don't want to die. Why should I have to die?

It's a simple issue.

It's better to die than live a life like that. But then again, I don't want to die.

So, I want to live like before.

Is this just a world?

It's a world within a game, but… it's also a world where magical abilities truly exist.

There's got to be something for sure. Some way to shake off these constraints.

Even in the game, it was like this.

The term 'semi-permanent' often appears in the descriptions of the constraints for a

reason.

As the story progresses, as the character grows, there will surely be ways to shed those constraints.

Shio-ram is precisely the right place to find such ways and the venue to gain the necessary strength to do so.

I made up my mind last night.

I firmly nodded my head and opened the box.

.

.

.

‘But how do I get there?’

I ran into an obstacle from the start.

CHAPTER 3
WHETHER ASLEEP OR AWAKE, BEWARE OF WATER

Facilities designed for the disabled were commonly found around me.

The most common for those with visual impairments might be the braille blocks embedded in the sidewalks.

Or for those with difficulty walking, there are inclined paths instead of stairs, and so on…

In society's view, the disabled are typically those who need assistance.

They are presumed to need help because they can't perform what would be natural for a person without any shortcomings.

And by definition… No, in actuality, I am now a disabled person.

Not to mention, one whose three of the five senses have failed, and as a mute who cannot speak. Even as a superhuman who has awakened mana, due to the curse of a short life, my body is weak…

For such a person like me, finding the gate terminal that connects to Shio-ram was an immense hardship.

I can't see, so how could I possibly know where that place is?

I know that Shio-ram was established on an artificial island in the North Pacific, but obviously, swimming there was out of the question.

Typically, I might think of airplanes first if I were going overseas, but in this world with gate terminals, it's the gates that come to mind before airplanes.

Gate. It does not refer to a door or an entryway but rather that familiar cliché found

in web novels.

It's that ridiculous setup, if thought of in reality, where spaces are connected and one can pass through, but… it exists here, so what can I do?

My current goal is the gate terminal, a crucial national facility connected to gates from all over the world.

It's the very facility that gets hit by terrorism day after day in the progression of the main story. It makes sense since blocking it can stop the reinforcement troops arriving almost instantaneously, making it a top target for terror.

Nevertheless, I was in a predicament, as I knew what the gate terminal was for but had no idea where it was located.

How am I supposed to find it blindfolded? Moreover, even if I wanted to ask someone for help, I had no voice to speak.

To begin with, there weren't any people I could ask for help. I couldn't simply grab a passerby and ask for directions.

Fortunately, there was a way.

[Please move 71 meters to your left.]

[Stop. Please wait by the traffic light on your right.]

A steady signal that became my relentless guide, leading me to my destination.

Its identity was the smartwatch strapped to my wrist.

Sent to me along with the notification from Shio-ram, in the package from this world imbued with magic engineering technologies.

Even though downgraded versions are quite common among civilians, the superhuman-grade smartwatch is of a different caliber.

With impressive durability to survive the back-and-forth struggle with all kinds of monsters and equipped with hundreds of functions in preparation for activities in dungeons and other isolated places.

[The destination, Seoul Gate Terminal, is 250 meters ahead.]

It was also equipped with a hologram function, but sadly, I could only discern the contours with my current spatial perception…

If it weren't for the bone conduction voice function, perhaps I wouldn't have been able to operate it properly.

After almost an hour of trial and error following the voice guidance, it had been almost four hours since I had left my home guided by the properly working smartwatch.

Though called a world within the game, the place was still referred to as 'Earth'.

There was still the United States, South Korea, Japan, China… was gone. North Korea too had fallen.

Numerous other nations had either sustained their existences or fallen by the wayside into the annals of history.

What was the setting again? Abilities, mana, dungeons, and towers appeared almost 200 years ago.

Back then, the world was almost identical to the ordinary Earth I knew.

But from one day about two hundred years ago, people manifested abilities and mana, and dungeons and towers appeared from which monsters poured out.

Fast forward two hundred years to the present.

A world where fantasy and modernity are mixed.

South Korea was one of the countries that had managed to survive.

Of course, in reality, it's only the shell of South Korea, the insides dominated by the superhuman forces.

Politics and the like were first swept clean by hordes of monsters, and after that, they were secondarily purged by superhuman powers.

Most nations followed a similar sequence.

‘I’m almost there.’

After one subway ride and switching buses three times, I finally arrived near the gate terminal following a twenty-minute walk.

The place where my home was situated was considered countryside, so it took a while to reach the city where the gate terminal was located.

Fortunately, there was a small amount of cash prepared at home to deal with financial matters.

It was ridiculous to have tens of thousands in cash without having a mobile phone.

And thus arrived at the gate terminal, I was at a loss for words.

‘I can’t see anything… ’

Although I managed to restore the range of my spatial perception to about 20 meters in diameter, I could not change the type of vision I had.

As a result, the world was predominantly black and green.

What stressed me out further were the stares and whispers fixating on me in real-time.

A heightened sense of awareness caught the subtle gazes.

I sometimes felt the illusion of being watched, but now it was too varied and accurate to dismiss as mere fancy.

And my hearing also became ridiculously keen, picking up the murmuring voices.

The gaze of seeing something novel. The muttering voices wondering if I’m blind. Pitying looks…

‘Ugh… ’

With my socially awkward personality, I’m extremely uncomfortable with all this

attention.

Previously, I would have simply ignored it or felt uneasy, but now irritation is bubbling up.

To put it mildly, it's extremely annoying.

'What should I do… '

I've entered the large building. But now, I have no idea what to do.

The process from the game? It's simplified, so I don't know about the procedures.

As I was contemplating what to do next, turning my head this way and that…

"Hello? Do you need any help?"

"?"

Someone approached me swiftly and struck up a conversation. Instinctive analysis was performed. Judging by the internal mana, the person was not an ordinary human but a superhuman.

The person who spoke to me… judging by the curves that could not belong to a man, it had to be a woman.

After a brief thought, I tapped my smartwatch to display subtitles through a hologram.

The second essential function on my smartwatch.

Though I couldn't see the hologram, others naturally could.

Using the smartwatch to display a hologram enabled me to communicate to some extent.

[Are you staff?]

My bone-conduction voice function ensured that I knew what I had typed out.

“Oh no, I saw your cadet uniform and wondered if you might need help. I am also a cadet and was waiting for the gate.”

Startled by her reply, I examined my spatial perception once more.

I hadn’t realized because she wasn’t wearing the cadet uniform but was instead in casual clothes.

Superhumans typically possess a large quantity of mana within them. Ordinary humans also possess mana, but it’s negligible by comparison.

Hence, distinguishing between a superhuman and an ordinary person was easy.

‘Mm.’

Having assistance would be good, of course. I was just about to ask nearby staff about the procedure.

[Wouldn’t I be bothering you?]

“Psh. It’s not like I’m helping you with something big.”

After I momentarily hesitated but accepted the help, the woman smiled broadly and clapped her hands enthusiastically, then carefully took hold of my sleeve and led me to the desk to assist with the basic procedures.

“…Please present your identification.”

[Yes.]

“…Identity confirmed. Please move to the gate queuing area.”

Upon showing my Shio-ram admission notice from the smartwatch, the staff quickly finished the procedure.

It was that time of year for new Shio-ram students to start their terms, so I overheard others using the gate as well.

“Ah, my name is Elia Slade. I’m new to Shio-ram this year too. Just call me Elia.”

[My name is Lee Ha-Yul. I'm also just starting at Shio-ram.]

After the procedure was over, we sat down somewhere not far from the gate, as it would have been awkward to remain standing during the spare time before the gate's activation, sharing our stories.

'…Smaller than I thought.'

I felt it when we stood side by side earlier, and even now as we sit across a table from each other.

Back in the original world, I never realized it because I hardly ever went out.

I've come to the realization that I'm quite short. Our eyes meet nearly at the same level when standing side by side.

I am a man, I have no pride that says I need to be taller than a woman, but being visibly shorter makes me unconsciously feel a bit small.

"I grew up listening to my parents saying that every cloud has a silver lining. When I was young, I didn't think much about it, but now it really sticks with me—"

Her name was Elia, and she had an infectious way of speaking that seemed to bounce with enthusiasm.

Her unique ability was in the healing category, and she had a young sister who, perhaps due to her taciturn nature, had no friends, which was a concern. Having often heard proverbs since childhood, they had now stuck with her… Even such trivial information was acquired.

In short, she was talkative.

I, who was naturally reticent, now couldn't even speak properly.

As a result, all I could do was to nod in agreement where appropriate or diligently tap my fingers to bring up holograms.

While I was listening intently to the endless onslaught of conversation and responding, I realized that there was a peculiar absence of talk about vision, about the eyes.

The fact that she had helped me when I was just pondering what to do, and even initiated conversation to keep me from getting bored, all without mentioning anything related to eyes, showed her delicate consideration.

'Intriguing.'

At the same time, I was feeling a real-time surprise inside.

Elia Slade. As the name suggests, she's not Korean. Even if it's just her name, she could be Korean, but at least the language she's currently speaking isn't Korean.

Yet, communication is not a problem. Moreover, detailed aspects like intonation and proverbs were also being directly processed by my brain.

'Tower of Growth… '

One of the pillars that holds up the world.

After the old network powered by electricity collapsed due to magical waves, the Tower of Growth built a new internet through magic, and unified the languages of the world with its setting.

"Ms. Slade, Mr. Lee Ha-Yul, please approach the gate."

As I hurriedly responded and pondered about the Tower, time seemed to fly by.

Together with Elia, I walked toward the gate, following the direction of a staff member.

'I wonder if it looks the same?'

In the game, there was a description of an Arc de Triomphe-like large structure with a swirling blue vortex in its midst.

Step by step, I approached the edge of my spatial perception, until I 'touched' the gate.

Touched?

'What's this?'

There’s a cut in space. Or, maybe not.

I could sense a different landscape beyond the gate.

‘Is this what’s detected beyond the gate?’

Although I could only see green outlines, it was definitely a different space than the terminal.

Is that Shio-ram?

“Ha-Yul?”

But what caught my attention was not what lay beyond the gate.

Between Shio-ram and this terminal was a void in the middle. The moment I noticed it, a sense of imminent danger overwhelmed me.

I shouldn’t look at that. It felt as if I would make eye contact with something menacing.

I shouldn’t go there. As I approach, I might be crushed without leaving any trace behind.

It was like being a mere ant, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the universe.

A premonitory chill ran down my neck at an instinctual level of warning.

My current spatial perception had many functions stripped away in a cost-cutting process.

If.

Had I seen that void with a complete spatial perception, I had the intuition that it wouldn’t have ended well.

[Yes.]

Even as I responded to Elia’s concerned inquiry, I minimized my spatial perception and threw myself into the gate.

My legs, stiff as statues, struggled to move.

'Why is there such an abundance of death flags, dammit.'

On my first day of transference, I almost fried my brain, I woke up from fainting to almost starve, and now this—almost having my brain explode again at witnessing something.

Three near-death experiences in ten days. If there is a God, He must surely despise me.

If there is indeed a God, who else would throw me into this world?

As I plunged into the sea, waves of sensation engulfed me. Before I could even take a full breath, I arrived at the Shio-ram Gate Terminal.

Stepping out hurriedly, a refreshing breeze cooled my body. My chest, which had been stifling, felt somewhat more open.

"Are you alright? You suddenly looked…"

[I am fine.]

"You're sweating profusely right now."

'Sweating?'

As I wiped my face, cold sweat smeared my hand. That was when I realized my face was drenched in sweat.

[I just got a bit tense.]

"Perhaps you should see the infirmary…"

[I really am alright.]

Dodging Elia's hand as she tried to wipe my forehead with her handkerchief, I shook my head.

Despite my assurances, Elia's concern did not wane. After repeated assurances that I

was indeed alright, and expressing my gratitude for her guidance, she finally nodded.

[Thank you very much for the guidance.]

At last, Elia showed the kindness of escorting me right to the door of my dormitory building.

There really are such good people in the world—such was the touch of gratitude I felt.

Surprisingly, the dormitory was a skyscraper. At a glance, a cluster of eight buildings arranged in a 2×4 format each appeared to easily exceed tens of stories in height.

There were also parks, walking paths, and lake facilities scattered about. Even from this view alone, it was markedly better than my previous home.

As I bowed my head in gratitude, Elia hesitated for a moment before extending her arm with the smartwatch on it.

"…Would it be okay to exchange contact information? It'd be nice to keep in touch since we'll be attending together."

[I would like that.]

[Contact 'Elia Slade' has been saved.]

As our synchronized smartwatches touched, a clear notification confirmed the contact was saved.

After exchanging contact details, she turned to leave, insisting that if anything came up, I must ask for help.

I could feel her worrisome gaze lingering to the very end.

She seems too kind-hearted. I worry whether she'll be taken advantage of in the future.

Watching Elia disappear beyond the range of my spatial perception with concern, I entered the dormitory.

[Student Lee Ha-Yul verified.]

Enrolling in the dormitory was swiftly completed thanks to the automated system.

A touch of the smartwatch near the doorknob automatically unlocked the door. As I entered, the lights on the ceiling automatically turned on.

'…Warm.'

The cold sweat from just seeing the void left me feeling sticky. I needed to take a shower and headed into the shower room after casually dropping my bags and taking off my shoes at the entrance.

I haven't even begun, yet I'm already exhausted.

I began to worry about tomorrow.

'Ah, it's cold! Argh, geez… Yikes!'

Due to not distinguishing the taps, I ended up fetching ice for a cold compress.

It seems I was doomed to experience the 'Curse of Silence' again today.

CHAPTER 4
SCHRÖDINGER'S STATUS WINDOW

After all, as this was going to be my sanctuary for up to four years, I took a quick look around.

A spacious living room and a clean kitchen. There were three rooms, bathrooms, a storeroom, and a balcony, all well provided for.

Also, furniture and products for everyday use were readily available.

The energy source of this world is not electricity, but mana. Hence, the products were clustered with mana in certain patterns.

Maybe that's home magic. I can feel how the patterns intertwine, but… still being a novice, I don't really understand. I plan to check again after I've learned more.

What particularly caught my fancy was the balcony. Its size seemed quite generous for cultivating plants.

The apartment itself is spacious, and it feels too large for just one person. It's big enough for two or three people to live without any issues.

Moreover, when considering amenities such as swimming pools, saunas, and gyms, I couldn't help but nod at the notion of this being a top-grade facility.

It's hard to tell whether this is a school dormitory or a resort hotel.

The exterior… I can't see it. I would guess a lot of care went into it. On illustrations, it looked no less luxurious than a top-tier hotel.

Even this might feel lacking to the world's gathered talents, so there exist even better dormitories than this.

Of course, buildings superior to this one are available based on academic performance.

Those with the highest grades could even receive a house on the campus grounds or a penthouse on the top floor of the dormitory building.

'It's scorching.'

A yelp escaped me involuntarily due to being directly hit by a water cannon (of the fire attribute) from the sunflower showerhead on the ceiling.

I tried to endure it, but even a small yelp triggered a reaction…

As a result, I got doubly hit by the 'Curse of Silence.'

I quickly dressed and bought some burn ointment to slather over my body.

Though frail, perhaps because I am a superhuman after all, I didn't suffer any major burns. An employee from the management office assured me that it would heal with the ointment applied.

While spreading the ointment all over my body, the thought of a burn prompted me to feel my right hand. An abnormal texture. A scar from a burn I got when I was young.

From the tip of my right hand up to my forearm is the size of the scar.

It's from a fire at the orphanage, a strangely inflicted burn that had doctors shaking their heads.

The doctor said he had never seen such a scar.

Even I grimace at how grotesque it looks. It's shaped like a dead tree struck by lightning and charred to a crisp.

That's why I still wear black arm covers on both hands when I go out. If I showed this in public, the stares would be less than kind.

Whether in the game world or not, the irony is that my body is still the one from the original world.

I sat down on the plush bed.

Already drained from crawling on the floor and being hit by the water cannon, I put my mind to work during these small moments for the sake of the future.

It's been about ten days since I arrived.

On the first day, my head nearly exploded, and I fainted. On the third day, I almost died of hunger and nearly became a corpse.

And just now, I almost had my head explode again from seeing something between the gates…

I judged that quickly normalizing the spatial perception that took over the role of 'eyes' was of utmost urgency.

Until today, I spent time adjusting and consuming time with spatial perception.

Now, I can maintain a range of about 30 meters in diameter.

The color is the same, but the feeling is much more open thanks to the increased range.

Also, the spatial perception has been tingling, especially accelerating since I saw something between the gates.

Thankfully, instead of my head nearly exploding, it seems to have affected my spatial perception.

I feel like I'll soon be able to change my point of view as I wish.

It's also time to set a goal.

Actually, there's not much to decide.

'Let's give up on playing like it's a game.'

Chapter 1 of the main story mainly takes place at Shio-ram. Since the security here is as it is, events like invasions all end up being duds.

However, various incidents and accidents naturally occur outside of Shio-ram.

Usually, if the player gets involved in a major incident, it happens during outdoor activities.

In the process, they get entangled with villains, face mutant monsters, get trapped in mutant dungeons…

Clearing all kinds of incidents and accidents and receiving rewards to improve one's specs was my main gameplay from the second run onwards.

'I have to give that up.'

Naturally, it's madness to wander around like that in reality. In the game, it's just HP being reduced, but in real-life, it's just lunacy.

The spec-up through external activities was due to greed, not a necessity.

At Shio-ram, I can grow sufficiently. Rather, I might grow faster at Shio-ram.

The blessing that descends from the Tower of Growth.

The growth correction applied to positive aspects.

In the original game, the rate was at least five times, wasn't it?

Where else would you find such an overpowered feature? At the very least, if I manage to hang in there, I can achieve at least five times faster growth than outside.

In this situation, there's no need for me to wander outside.

Also, the basic premise of spec-up through external events requires the reward measurement of the status window… Wait a minute.

A thought sparked in my mind, and I silently exclaimed.

'Don't I have a status window?'

Like most games, 〈Savior〉 also has a status window that objectively compiles the character's stats, and there are quests that toss out quests and rewards.

But the status window is described as a floating hologram…

I murmured to myself in silence for a moment.

‘Status window? Status?’

There’s no change.

I stretched out my hand and stirred the air. There’s nothing. The same goes for my spatial perception. It only detects empty space.

‘It’s not there, right?’

It really isn’t there, right? It’s not that I just can’t see it, right? It’s not something that I have to open my eyes to see, right…?

Honestly, if there were one, it would have been detected by spatial perception. Definitely.

Anyway.

I discard the idea of spec-up through external activities. I’ll choose to grow conventionally at Shio-ram.

Furthermore, I plan not to involve myself in the main story if possible.

‘The player is actually unnecessary in the story.’

I’m not the protagonist; I’m a player.

In 〈Savior〉, even if the player does absolutely nothing, the world does not end in destruction.

Well, depending on the development, the destruction of some countries is possible, but it’s resolved one way or another by the main characters.

The impact of the player’s intervention ends with preventing the incident before it happens, reducing the damage of the incident, or conversely, increasing the damage.

The player is not an essential existence. Fortunately, that’s one less thing to worry about.

Additionally, as far as I've checked, all the protagonists of this incoming class exist. Most from the previous classes match, too. Most of those active as superhumans in the world are familiar.

There have been some changes in casting… but in reality, not a game, such unavoidable variables exist.

The world may not progress exactly as the game story, but at least the framework is similar, isn't it?

In other words, the story will progress on its own, and I just need to do my part.

Naturally, my primary goal is to lift the constraints that are placed on me.

Three constraints have been placed on me.

The 'Curse of Sensory Seal' that took away smell, taste, and sight.

The 'Curse of Short Life' that makes me wither at a young age.

The 'Curse of Silence' that obstructs conversation.

I remember one way to lift a constraint, so I must get a handle on that direction.

'…But at least one more needs to be lifted.'

If there's one I must lift, it's definitely the Curse of Short Life. But as I previously thought, life won't be enjoyable with the Curse of Sensory Seal, so that's also mandatory to lift.

…Honestly, the Curse of Silence could be left alone if I must.

Even back on the original Earth, I hardly ever opened my mouth except to talk to myself, so I think I could live just fine as a mute…

Additionally, there's a way to indirectly bypass the Curse of Silence by collecting an artifact, as far as I remember.

'How should I plan my growth route?'

I fall back into contemplation.

To lift one of the constraints, I need enough power to clear a certain dungeon.

I need to reach a certain level of growth to clear it.

Three abilities were given to me along with the three constraints.

‘Spatial Perception’ that can serve as a radar in all directions.

‘Magic Affinity’ that gives an affinity for mana at a level that would make archmages step aside.

‘Jack of All Trades’ that possesses above-average qualities in all sorts of fields.

‘Ah… If it had come to this, I should have chosen something other than Sensory Seal and Jack of All Trades.’

The Curse of Sensory Seal that robbed me of half of my senses in an instant.

Jack of All Trades, which, to put it nicely, is a master of all, but to put it poorly, it’s a nondescript mixed skill.

The reason I chose the Curse of Sensory Seal was that the risk was just a drop in the sense stats, and even that could be more than compensated with spatial perception.

Also, since my goal was soloing this time, and if I could grow to the extreme, Jack of All Trades would make it possible to manage to tank, deal damage, and heal to a certain extent, that’s why I chose it.

But if it’s not a game but reality, I’m not confident I can utilize Jack of All Trades properly…

‘If I knew it would be like this, I would have chosen a single trait.’

At the very least, had I chosen something like the trait of a Sword Saint, I could have made sure progress in that direction.

Jack of All Trades can at most make one a prodigy.

In Shio-ram, where all the world's geniuses gather, being just a prodigy might only be enough for the lower ranks.

'I can only rely on Spatial Perception and Magic Affinity.'

Spatial Perception, the human radar itself, and Magic Affinity, which can be chosen for any profession but especially exhibits supreme performance in the mage route.

'Maybe I should go the mage route… '

Honestly, if asked to wield a weapon and fight monsters in close combat… Could I do it?

Regardless of whether I can do it well or not, given my traits, it's best to go the mage route.

'My head hurts… '

As my contemplation ended, a wave of exhaustion pressed down on me, and without resisting, I lay down on the bed.

It's still too early to sleep, but I was too tired.

Thanks to the overload of information from spatial perception, I might toss and turn in bed, but it's not that I can't sleep when I try to.

The welcome party for new students won't be until next week. Arriving early, I have plenty of spare time.

Since my eyes have always been shut, drowsiness gradually crept over me.

At the same time, a crumpled unease in a corner of my heart also made its presence felt.

The only method I know to lift a constraint.

It involves using an artifact buried in a specific dungeon. Although the dungeon itself is hidden away, hunters who roam around looking for such places are bound to scour every nook and cranny as a matter of course.

What if someone finds it first?

What if I'm too late because I dragged my feet for a moment?

The anxiety of possibly losing the only method I know, when I need at least two, chased away the drowsiness.

'Damn it.'

With a grimace, I got up. I sat down at the desk provided in the room and operated the smartwatch.

[Viewing 'Basic Mana Manipulation (Lower)'.]

There's one week until the welcome party for the new students.

I should memorize some theory before then.

.

.

.

[—The proposed origins of mana are numerous. One theory suggests it originates from natural energy, the natural theory, while another posits it comes from stars, passed down to humans, and, and, and, and—]

'Why is it doing this?'

– Ding!

– Ding!

[Alert. Mana reserve at 3%.]

'Ah.'

* * *

– Ding!

[Observation… Successful.]

[Summoning… Successful.]

[Synchronization… Succ… essful…]

[The ‘Player Correction System’ is ready.]

CHAPTER 5
CAN'T YOU SEE IN FRONT OF YOU?

It's no new revelation, but Shio-ram is ridiculously vast.

I remember it being roughly the size of Jeju Island from the original world. I had no real sense of how large Jeju Island was.

But there was a common understanding that using an entire island the size of Jeju for a single educational institution was mind-blowing.

The facilities for superhumans apparently require a lot of land, hence the need for such expansive space.

Thanks to its size, autonomous buses run within Shio-ram at roughly ten-minute intervals at each stop.

Leaving the dormitory, I sat on the bus and peered… sensed the path through the window.

Feeling the space whisking by, I was involuntarily awestruck.

Although I knew from the game that an entire large island was being used, actually experiencing it firsthand brought a different kind of emotion.

It had been ten days and another week since I started living in this other world.

Today was the day of the welcome party for new students.

While I've been cooped up in my room grappling with textbooks, other cadets have been steadily completing their dormitory entries.

"Hey, isn't that him? The, uh, special admission one."

"It seems so by the looks of it."

“Doesn’t he feel somewhat different for someone in the perception department?”

The piercing stares and murmurs were evidence of this.

Even tucked away in a corner of the bus, I was noticeable enough to be recognized at a glance. Is walking with my eyes closed really such an attention-grabbing affair?

Upon closer consideration, it did seem like something that would attract attention.

I had known for less than a day, but my name was already quite famous on the student community forums.

That phrase I just heard, ‘special admission.’

It refers to a student who didn’t take the Shio-ram organized exam but was directly contacted by an official and admitted.

Simply put, it doesn’t seem like something that would draw much attention.

There were also students recommended by Shio-ram professors to take the exam and others who had powerful backers and benefited from that to gain admission.

However, if one understands that the ‘official’ mentioned here means someone other than a professor, only one person in fact, then it becomes understandable.

‘Neriel Claidya.’

The founder of Shio-ram.

The owner of The Tower of Growth.

The Silent Sorceress.

A legend in the superhuman world who has lived for over 150 years.

Her incredible feats include quelling top-tier dungeons and shattering dozens of first-class dungeons.

Even a single first-class dungeon could wipe out a city if mishandled, and a top-tier dungeon going awry could threaten the existence of a nation.

Especially the era when the principal was active, it wasn't a peaceful era like today but rather one of upheaval and chaos.

Considering that dungeons going out of control are rare even in advanced countries today, those achievements are all the more astonishing.

In other words, the principal is a historical figure engraved across dozens of pages of history for having thwarted national-overthrowing and city-destroying dungeons.

Also, being the owner of an educational institution that has produced superhumans who have been at the forefront for almost 100 years.

There's a talent recommended by such a person. For the first time in nearly a hundred years since Shio-ram was founded.

The very first one.

Even that alone was enough gossip to chew on, but the first subject of such a case is blind and mute? Where else would you find gossip material like this? Even I would be intrigued.

'When it was just a game, it didn't matter.'

Special admission status wasn't really a concern in the game.

Even as the main story unfolded, I never met Principal Neriel in person, and in the game, it was just a matter of interest levels rising and that was it.

But now that it's become reality, the pressure is no joke.

It's not an exaggeration to say that literally everyone is looking at me and murmuring. And it's not just nice things I'm hearing; I'm also catching snippets of slander.

"F*ck. How can a blind person be admitted to Shio-ram?"

"Backed by the principal, what does being blind matter."

"Wow… is this that disability admission?"

They think their whispering is unheard, but it's quite clear to my improved hearing…

'Disability admission… '

I've seen the term 'disability admission' on the internet. My feelings about it weren't particularly bad.

Well, even I think 'disability admission' fits my case…

I'm resolute to break free from my constraints. I've vowed to become stronger for that cause, but honestly, I don't have confidence that I'll truly become strong.

To swing a sword and split a car in half, to conjure fire from human hands and burn down a building.

It was nothing more than virtual reality. In the common sense that I knew, such things were impossible.

That common sense shattered about two weeks ago.

My world changed in an instant. Suddenly, I lost my sight and gained the bizarre ability to read space and act accordingly.

I can also sense the mana that exists all around the world. There's some mana inside my body, too.

It seems possible when I look at it… but the shattered remains of my previous common sense deny it.

'Is that even possible?' Even if it's not impossible, it doesn't seem possible for me.

[The next stop is The First Banquet Hall.]

How long had I waited, sitting on pins and needles? The bus doors opened at the destination, and students started getting off in droves.

I, too, joined the tail of the crowd and stepped off.

Thanks to the cadets all heading to the banquet hall, I didn't need to switch on my navigation, just following the crowd was enough.

Entering the banquet hall.

It was bustling with students who had arrived earlier, but the building was spacious enough not to feel uncomfortable.

Checking the time, there was about half an hour left until the start.

As soon as I entered, I avoided the imminent attention and stepped outside the banquet hall, heading to a nearby convenience store to at least quench my thirst.

'I need to get used to this, too.'

I've never received this kind of attention before in my life, so it's awkward and burdensome beyond measure.

If it were the old days, I would've just dropped everything and run away, but given my current situation, I have no choice but to swallow my tears and stay put in Shio-ram.

I sighed deeply and opened the cap of the bottled water I bought from the convenience store, taking a sip.

Under normal circumstances, I would have bought fruit juice, but with my sense of taste being what it is, I felt depressed knowing it would taste like nothing.

I wished I could at least smell the fragrance… but my sense of smell was just as compromised.

At that thought, depression hit again. It feels like negativity is constantly hovering in front of me… oh wait, I can't even see ahead.

A barrage of negative thoughts. At this rate, I might as well be digging a tunnel straight to the Earth's core. I shook my head vigorously to shake off the thoughts and exhaled a sigh.

…Negative thinking changes little. I can't just curse my situation and stop there.

To escape this pit of negativity, I need to act. It's not the thoughts but the actions that must change.

‘That’s right. I’m already preparing, aren’t I?’

As I reassured myself and was about to head back to the banquet hall, an incident occurred.

“Hey, hey! Watch out…!”

It happened in an instant.

As I was exiting the alley by the convenience store, something that was outside my spatial perception ran towards me at high speed and crashed into me.

“?!”

“Ouch! What the f*ck?”

The water bottle flew through the air, scattering its contents. Caught off guard by the sudden impact, my body tumbled to the ground, and I almost let out a scream without realizing it.

In fact, I did scream when I was hit. Consequently, I’m struggling with the pain now.

“Damn it. Can’t you see in front of you? Move when people tell you to get out of the, way… do… oh, oh, oh oh…”

My throat hurt. I’ve become quite accustomed to the pain from the ‘Curse of Silence,’ but still, pain is pain.

Tears trickled down.

While trying to control the pain caused by the Curse of Silence, I heard a familiar voice from above. It was the character voice I had often heard while playing the game.

I reflexively looked up, and the voice trailed off before ultimately becoming silent. Through my spatial perception, I could see the outline of a woman looking down at me.

I could only determine the silhouette, but from the voice just now, I could guess her identity.

Hong Yeon-Hwa.

A member of one of the top three Korean clans, ‘Gop-Hwa.’

The daughter of Hong Jin-Yeon, the current Lord of Gop-Hwa clan, and granddaughter of the former Lord.

One of the protagonists with the potential to take over as the future Lord of Gop-Hwa clan and stand in line with the world’s strongest characters.

“Uh, I mean, that…”

[I’m sorry.]

Before a suddenly silent Hong Yeon-Hwa could speak again, I hurriedly got up and bowed deeply.

[I am truly sorry for not responding properly due to my slow reflexes, and for causing you discomfort.]

Did I really do something wrong? Wasn’t it the other person who crashed into me?

This thought was tucked away before it could fully raise its head. Arguing about who was at fault here wasn’t a good approach.

There was a feature about Hong Yeon-Hwa that came to mind before even her beautiful appearance, which resembled dancing flames of her unique ability that caused a special mutation.

A fiery personality. In short, hot-tempered. An irritable nature and the creed of repaying both grudges and gratitude tenfold.

Added to that was the vibe coming from Hong Yeon-Hwa.

She was a fireball. The mana took the shape of fire; just looking at it seemed like it could burn me to ashes.

Reacting with “You crazy woman, it was your fault” would certainly not bring about a good response.

In my mind's eye, I saw myself becoming fuel for the fire.

At least in the game, that's how it was, and in reality, trying to stand up to her would not end well.

With that judgment, I quickly stood up and tapped my watch.

"No—! Noo! I'm the one who should be sorry! I was moving in a hurry and didn't see in front of me. I am really sorry."

?

But the reaction was peculiar.

Instead, it was Hong Yeon-Hwa who was apologizing and bowing to me.

Wouldn't it have been straight to a combat event if this were the game?

I hesitated for a moment before bowing in return.

"……"

"……"

An awkward silence filled the air.

I was caught off guard by Hong Yeon-Hwa's unexpected behavior, and Hong Yeon-Hwa… well, I have no idea why she's like this.

"Uh… you're that guy, right? The special admission student."

[Yes, my name is Lee Ha-Yul.]

"I know the name. You're quite well-known, or… um…"

I'm aware that I'm famous, for better or worse.

I understood why.

The recommendation admissions probably felt the same, but the exam admissions

would be displeased with me.

After all, they had been striving and sweating for this, barely managing to get admitted, let alone those who took a simple test for recommendation admissions.

I was admitted without even taking a test. From their perspective, my presence must be unbearably annoying.

I had just experienced their stares on the bus, and even in the original work, the favorability of other cadets towards me was generally low at the beginning.

'?'

Her trailing words stretched on. Hong Yeon-Hwa's response was once again peculiar. She seemed unsure what to do, her fingertips trembling slightly.

"Um… I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm."

[It's okay.]

Really, I can't figure out why she's acting this way.

In the midst of the renewed awkwardness, I suddenly remembered the welcome party schedule and hastily checked the time.

Fortunately, there was still time left. The convenience store was right next door, so there was enough time to walk there.

"Just a minute!"

As I was about to turn away, Hong Yeon-Hwa frantically waved her hand.

"Um, should I show you the way? I feel a bit sorry about earlier…"

'I should decline… '

[Thank you.]

There was no refusal this time either.

* * *

‘Crazy woman.’

Such a damned crazy woman.

Hong Yeon-Hwa cursed herself as she reflected on the recent incident.

Here’s what happened: she overslept a bit and had to rush to prepare before dashing out of the dormitory.

The facilities were fairly decent. Not as good as her home, but still top-notch, allowing her a comfortable sleep.

But oversleeping meant Hong Yeon-Hwa had to hurry.

She didn’t take the bus. It was slower than running, and normally she would have taken it to pass the time.

But with the time crunch, she just ran.

Thinking back now, did she really need to be in such a hurry? It wasn’t necessary. She should have had enough leeway to walk from halfway there.

…Her vision had narrowed, so she failed to notice him. She just thought she was late and intended to run all the way there.

With her thoughts fixated on one side, her vision narrowed, and thanks to that, she failed to notice someone walking out of the alley and crashed into them.

There was a bit of an excuse. The other party’s presence was suspiciously faint. Faint enough that she, a superhuman with enhanced perception, missed it.

Also, before the collision, she had slowed down. It would have been enough that if she had bumped into an ordinary person, they would have staggered a bit and that’s all.

But the person she hit? They tumbled to the ground as if flailing about. And then they choked as if stabbed by a knife.

The overreaction, akin to acting out pain, left her somewhat dumbfounded.

So she quickly lost her temper, and in less than 10 seconds regretted it.

She glanced back. The male cadet, who had grabbed the sleeve of her uniform, was following her ploddingly.

His noticeable feature was his small stature. She was tall, but he was even shorter than her. So delicate-looking that his tumbling made sense.

Moreover, the way he grasped her sleeve with both eyes firmly shut and followed her stirred a strange protective impulse in her.

…The dampness around his eyes pricked her heart. Why were they wet? She didn't want to imagine, but the answer came unbidden.

And she, who had knocked down a blind boy unable to see in front of him, had blurted out 'Can't you see in front of you?' like a curse from the depths of hell…

'Damn… '

Hong Yeon-Hwa was always advised by her family elders, including her grandfather and father, to tone down her personality.

Her innate temperament was part of it, and the coddling atmosphere unique to her family also contributed to the formation of her character. Additionally, various experiences had made her impatient and irritable.

Above all, Hong Yeon-Hwa herself hadn't particularly heeded the advice, which was a significant reason. And this was the result.

Unable to contain her snap of anger, she had caused this commotion.

…She had definitely brushed off her clothes earlier, but it seemed some dust had stuck to them. Reaching out, she flicked off the dust from his shoulder, causing him to flinch.

"Ah, I saw some dust on you."

[Yes.]

His flinch might have been a reflex, as he nodded and replied via the hologram.

…Naturally, speaking with one's mouth is much more convenient than tapping the smartwatch to display a hologram response.

But he couldn't do that. Speak, that is.

'Should I have kept my mouth shut?'

It's awkward. It feels strange to start a conversation.

Especially with someone I just met for the first time.

And even more so from the position of the offender who had just committed such a rude act.

She was trying to do some damage control by offering a quick apology and guiding him personally, but she knew this wouldn't be enough to satisfy.

The damage was already done.

Hong Yeon-Hwa inwardly chastised herself while carefully leading Lee Ha-Yul by the sleeve.

CHAPTER 6
THE FRESHMEN WELCOME PARTY (1)

The chandeliers on the ceiling bathed the banquet hall in a golden hue.

The light, neither too bright nor too dim, accentuated the luxurious interior.

At the center of each table were decorations like vases, surrounded by a variety of foods from different cultures.

Brand name drinks and mineral waters, some of which cost hundreds of thousands of won per bottle, were also available.

“Do we really need to take Basic Magic? It’s probably stuff we’ve already learned at the Academy.”

“Even so, the level of the professors here is different, so you can expect to gain something new.”

“Liana Velus teaching ‘The Correlation Between Spirits and Magic’? I remember her being active on the African front…”

“She retired recently, they said it was because of an injury.”

Cadets, dressed in casual clothes, were scattered throughout, each finding someone to talk to and engage in conversation.

What subjects are you going to focus on?

I heard this new professor is conducting such a course.

Lately, the growth of this clan has been remarkable.

I’ve heard that the magic environment in Africa is unusual, and so on.

There were trivial personal stories, but there were also a significant number of

professional topics such as the state of the world.

Shio-ram cadet.

It is a status granted to those who are considered to have the highest potential among all people of this age group worldwide.

If there are no particular problems, they are the ones who will become the main axis of the next generation. Being a cadet comes with its benefits, but many take pride in the status alone.

“Obviously, I’ll need to take Basic Magic… Looks like I’ll have to take all the foundation courses.”

“That’s what the free semester is for. You have to take whatever courses you didn’t get to do in advance.”

There were also those who weren’t engaging in such professional-level conversations.

More precisely, they were the ones who didn’t yet have the knowledge to hold such discussions.

There are officially two methods of admission to Shio-ram.

First. Admission through examination.

After announcing the exams worldwide, individuals are selected based on current skills and future potential across various areas.

Most of these cadets come from so-called superhuman families and have grown up with professional and systematic education.

If the first method is about finding sprouts that are awakening their potential, the second method is about finding seeds that have yet to begin sprouting.

Those who are neither from superhuman families nor have received systematic education but whose potential is undeniable are carefully examined and then brought to Shio-ram as cadets.

The ratio is approximately 9:1.

“That guy who just came in must be a special admission. Looks like he really is blind.”

“I heard he has a perception-specialized unique ability. With that, he could definitely navigate even with his eyes closed.”

“Perception abilities are indeed essential for an assault squad. But…”

Is special admission that important?

One cadet lowered his voice to say this, and the cadet next to him nodded cautiously.

“…We still don’t know.”

There was one topic common to both groups of conversation.

Special admission.

This word popped up here and there throughout the banquet hall.

Strictly speaking, it’s a concept similar to recommendation admission, but ‘special admission’ is different in that the person who reviewed it is different.

A talent personally selected and brought by the owner of the cradle. Interest in that person is still burning in real-time.

Whether it’s in a good way or a bad way.

If we’re being honest, there was more negative public opinion.

Most keep their mouths shut because they know who made the decision for special admission, but they harbor discontent and doubts internally.

Thump! That was when the doors swung open assertively. A cadet with scarlet hair made her appearance through the wide-open doors.

Exclamations burst out from various places.

Her hair, seemingly the embodiment of raging flames, flowed just over her shoulders,

and her eyes, like top-tier rubies inset whole, captured the attention of the people.

She had such a fine figure that even the casually worn jumper looked luxurious, and her gait overflowed with self-assurance.

Hong Yeon-hwa.

A topic of conversation not unlike the special admission student.

She's one of the most promising cadets of the 122nd batch of Shio-ram and the successor to the Gop-hwa Clan.

Before admission, she was the prodigy who single-handedly subdued a 5th-rank monster.

…And everyone's gaze, which had been focused on the boy who followed her in, widened.

[Thank you for guiding me here.]

"No, what's there to thank me for? If you need help with anything, just let me know. The mistake was on my end, after all."

[Yes.]

Doesn't the atmosphere seem rather gentle? Hong Yeon-hwa even took on a considerate demeanor, as if conceding something.

Those who had previously met Hong Yeon-hwa all knew very well about her fiery temperament.

Overwhelming ability and stunning beauty. If there was another feature that followed her, it would be her prickly character.

There's an anecdote of someone who kept provoking her at a party getting beat up and thrown out of the party venue.

There are countless other stories about her eccentricities.

From the perspective of those who have experienced it, the current demeanor Hong

Yeon-hwa is showing… almost as if being considerate… the gentle-feeling attitude was a culture shock in itself.

It was like seeing an ill-tempered tiger not eating a small puppy it took in but instead licking it tenderly.

“My god.”

The perception of the special admission student in the minds of the majority was revised.

By something that managed to change the attitude of the infamous Hong Yeon-hwa.

* * *

‘…What kind of gaze is this?’

The variety of emotions directed at me before was diverse.

Curiosity, doubt, suspicion, envy, and jealousy, among others.

While similar, different emotions were now being thrown my way, and now, something else seemed to have been added.

It was as if they were looking at something incomprehensible, something remarkable.

“These motherf*ckers…”

The gaze was also directed at Hong Yeon-hwa next to me. Grinding her teeth, she started to say something but then suddenly flinched and turned to look at me, closing her mouth.

“Uh… I wasn’t talking to you, it was meant for them over there.”

“……”

“Don’t misunderstand…”

‘What’s really going on? Why does it feel like she’s watching me?’

Isn't this a new form of harassment?

I've never experienced it, but I've read lots of stories about outcasts during school days.

It was about the popular kids pretending to take care of the outcasts while actually mocking them…

If this truly is harassment, how should I escape it? While pondering deeply, a woman approached with quick steps.

"Hong Yeon-hwa, why are you so late? You barely made it before the start."

A voice as fresh and lively as her footsteps. This time, too, it was a voice I had heard in-game.

"I overslept. Ariel usually wakes me up, but she left me alone today."

"Why?"

"Dad's orders. He said to stop pampering me from now on."

'Being pampered to this extent, what a joke.' As Hong Yeon-hwa grumbled and complained, the woman who had just smiled at her turned her gaze toward me.

"And who is this?"

"Oh. This is Lee Ha-Yul. He was a special admission this year. We ran into each other on the way here and came together."

"Huh? You ran into him and came together? You, Hong Yeon-hwa…?"

"What's wrong with that, you b*tch…! Ah, ahem!"

"?"

There are three renowned clans that represent South Korea.

'Gop-hwa', the clan to which Hong Yeon-hwa belongs.

‘Taesan’, known as the first clan established in South Korea.

And the woman in front of me, Baek Ahrin, belonged to ‘Changhae’.

Casually known by names that mean fire, earth, and sea, they are collectively called the three great clans of South Korea. In the original work, they were superhuman forces with significant importance.

‘Baek Ahrin.’

In the original story, Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin were a pairing that was often intertwined.

If Hong Yeon-hwa was the next successor of the Gop-hwa Clan, Baek Ahrin was the next successor of the Changhae Clan.

If Hong Yeon-hwa had shoulder-length red hair and a hasty, fiery temperament, then Baek Ahrin had blue hair that reached her waist and a calm, cool demeanor.

Hong Yeon-hwa was a flame that burned everything, while Baek Ahrin was water and ice that healed and blocked.

“…What is it? Did something happen?”

“What do you mean something happened? Why are you suddenly talking nonsense?”

“That’s a lie. You didn’t listen even when I told you to fix your bad habits until recently.”

Baek Ahrin, seeming to press for the truth, and Hong Yeon-hwa, revealing a reaction as if something had pricked her conscience.

How can I put it? Listening to the two of them bicker brought a new sentiment.

I’m experiencing a scene I’ve only seen in the game right before my eyes… or rather, not seeing it.

‘Damn sensory seal. This is the biggest problem.’

“Ah! Sorry, I got distracted for a moment. I’m Baek Ahrin of the Changhae Clan. Nice

to meet you."

[Yes, I'm Lee Ha-Yul. Please take care of me.]

After a bit of bickering, as if she had forgotten something, Baek Ahrin with an expression of realization extended her hand to greet me.

Without hesitation, I clasped her hand. The cool chill from her palm almost made me shudder involuntarily.

Baek Ahrin's eyes curved prettily.

"You have perception… right? It's an essential unique ability for assault teams. Oh, I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable."

[No, it's alright. And yes, it's in the perception category.]

Baek Ahrin, relieved that I wasn't uncomfortable, smiled brightly saying she still apologizes.

To the eye, she seems bright and chirpy, yet with a sheen of politeness.

'Is this an act? Even now, I'm not quite sure.'

If you raise Baek Ahrin's favorability, you can hear about her 'mask' episode.

That's where the choices diverge.

Whether to deal with the mask or leave it. If you make the wrong choice here, Baek Ahrin turns into a clear enemy.

The run where I messed up the mask story and ended up killing Baek Ahrin was the 11th run.

For reference, the 11th run ended with me retiring because of Hong Yeon-hwa, who chased me like a madwoman.

Despite their nearly opposite personalities, the two were depicted as especially close in the game.

So when one died, the other came charging with a vengeance. I experienced it in the 11th run.

Somehow Baek Ahrin found out who killed her, and it was quite a hassle when she dropped everything to pursue me. Hong Yeon-hwa holds about 30% of the blame for ruining the 11th run.

That's why, in the next run, I didn't go anywhere near Hong Yeon-hwa or Baek Ahrin.

After a brief chat and as the time for the welcome party to start drew near, Baek Ahrin waved her hand with regret.

"It looks like it's about to start. See you later. And…"

Baek Ahrin reached out with her hand, which had a smartwatch, and tapped mine.

[Contact 'Baek Ahrin' has been saved.]

"If you need help with anything, please contact me anytime."

As she said that, Baek Ahrin walked towards a group of people who seemed to be her friends.

"That's right. I almost forgot."

[Contact 'Hong Yeon-hwa' has been saved.]

After similarly registering her contact, Hong Yeon-hwa looked around concerned.

Although she pretended not to, there were many glances furtively directed this way.

"Should I stay with you? It's no bother, you can hang out with me and our group."

[It would be too much of an imposition. Thank you, but I'll have to decline.]

I'm already feeling maximum pressure right now.

Being alone is still the most comfortable.

Hesitating, Hong Yeon-hwa finally moved toward where Baek Ahrin was after I

repeatedly insisted that I was fine.

'Sigh… '

Finally, I was alone. The focus soon dispersed due to the entrance of other main characters, giving me a little breathing room.

I trudged to a secluded spot and slumped down into a chair prepared for the weary.

Despite the grand preparation, in essence, it's simply a celebration for new students as the name suggests.

In the game, it would be the vice-principal giving a few words before the party immediately starts amongst the freshmen.

'I'm tired.'

Just yesterday, I barely slept. Partly because of the spatial perception, and partly due to my restless mind…

The headaches were unrelenting, and it's not just that my vision is blurry – my sight cuts off entirely.

The world as I perceive it now has a limit of a 30m diameter sphere. Even that is a plain world of black and green outlines.

I'm trying, but even though it feels like my spatial perception will change soon, it remains the same.

'Sigh… '

I feel like I'm going to go crazy, and I haven't even started. I'm so tired, my eyes are closing, but I can't fall asleep.

If it were up to me, I'd just crash for two straight days.

'But I should at least see the main characters before I go.'

– Thud!

As I sat there blankly, the sound of the chandelier shutting off echoed. I anticipated darkness surrounding me, but suddenly, my spatial perception expanded beyond its normal range.

'?'

My usual 30m perception range had almost stretched to 50m.

Thanks to that, I could sense someone stepping onto the central stage, which had just come within my perception range.

It was as if the woman had teleported there suddenly, draped in a large robe as if to advertise herself as a magician.

'It's the vice-principal.'

The Freshmen Welcome Party begins with a speech by the vice-principal, who appears on stage through teleportation.

The party had started.

CHAPTER 7
THE FRESHMEN WELCOME PARTY (2)

“First, I would like to extend my congratulations to everyone entering the cradle, followed by a brief speech.”

The expansion of my spatial perception was sudden. During the ten days I had struggled with this ability, there had been times when the range expanded, but only by centimeters at a time, never as substantially as it did now.

Before I could ponder over this, the vice-principal made her move.

She stepped onto the stage and slowly scanned the audience. Those who met her gaze stiffened with tension.

“Two hundred years ago was a time of chaos. Dungeons and towers sprung up everywhere, and neglected monsters formed groups and ravaged the surroundings.”

Despite the lack of a microphone, her cool voice spread to every corner of the building.

I paused my thoughts and listened to the vice-principal’s speech.

“It was a time when the death of people was taken lightly. The person next to me could turn into a cold corpse just for failing to find a piece of bread, and the lover whispering sweet nothings the night before could become food for a monster. It was a common sight in those days.”

Two hundred years ago.

Monsters from legends tore through fiction to appear, and the powerlessness of an individual human crossed the line of common sense.

Even after about a hundred years, the chaos had not been subdued.

Monsters, dungeons, towers.

Unique abilities, magic, awakening.

Humanity was granted the powers of magic and unique abilities, as if to counter the threats sprouting worldwide, yet achieving peace was still a tall order.

A world filled with chaos and despair needed heroes to quell it and open the doors to peace.

“The Cradle.”

Despite the vice-principal slightly murmuring the word, for some reason, it deeply penetrated my ears.

“Neriel, who had conquered The Tower of Growth and obtained the authority of the tower’s master, established an educational institution on a man-made island centered around the tower.”

The Tower of Space.

The Tower of Harmony.

The Tower of Observation.

The Tower of Growth.

The four iconic towers that soared high into the sky.

Unlike other towers that spewed out monsters, these proud towers simply stood their ground, accepting challengers.

Neriel was the first to conquer one of the four towers that are said to sustain the current world.

Even before conquering the tower, she traveled the world and saved many lives.

The rights she gained by conquering the tower were used to nurture heroes.

In times of vague chaos and despair, she hoped that heroes would emerge from this place.

She poured that power not into herself but into the cultivation of heroes, and that's why our current principal is called a great person.

In return for her efforts to save people around the world and bestow the power of the towers, the talents who flocked from around the globe began to stand as heroes against threats in various places.

"Shio-ram. The traces of legends that the heroes will draw start here, and with that sentiment, this place is Shio-ram."

About forty years ago, around the time Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin's grandparents were active, heroes emerging from Shio-ram finally cleared the last special-grade dungeon, and the world declared the end of chaos.

In short, it was an explanation of the world setting.

"……"

Glancing around with my spatial perception, I could see a lot of cadets who seemed emotionally charged as if they had been struck by a drum.

Some were trembling so much that they struggled to hold back tears…

While most around me were immersed and moved by the speech, I didn't quite get it.

It's partly because I've only been in this world for about ten days as a person from another world, and also because I've heard these lines to my heart's content in the game.

Additionally, my conspicuous position as a special admission makes me self-conscious.

Most here have worked hard and shed blood and sweat to get in, but I just got in by eating for free.

"…therefore, we hope that you, who have entered Shio-ram, will be born as heroes illuminating the future, and we want you to know that we will spare no support in that endeavor."

The vice-principal finished her speech and smiled wryly at the enthusiastic reaction

of the cadets.

“It seems I’ve been too serious for a welcoming party. Let’s cut the talk here along with the announcements. The official academic schedule will start in two days, so please enjoy yourselves to the fullest today, and prepare for the training ahead.”

After saying that, the vice-principal looked around briefly.

Then, her gaze stopped at a certain place.

Even though my eyes were closed, I could tell that the gaze was directed at me.

“…That will be all.”

As the vice-principal clapped her hands together, she vanished in the blink of an eye.

“Was that spatial teleportation? I can stare all I want, but I can’t tell.”

“There was no fluctuation of magic, either. How does she cast it…”

“Well, you can’t even begin to mess with spatial stuff without the related unique ability.”

Spatial-related abilities are notoriously difficult to use, and their reputation is well-known.

The chandeliers that had gone out lit up again, illuminating the interior. The orchestra that had been waiting started to play.

Gentle music flowed throughout the banquet hall.

Only then did the cadets let out a deep sigh and began to chatter about what had just happened.

The subject that dominated the conversation was the vice-principal’s method of arrival and departure, being shown twice.

‘Spatial teleportation.’

I know about it through the knowledge in the game. It’s the vice-principal’s signature

technique, spatial teleportation.

A technique that calculates the coordinates of the departure point and the destination, connects the spaces, and transports the subject.

It's different from the gate terminals. The gates are merely a power exerted through The Tower of Space, but the vice-principal's spatial teleportation is a personal ability.

While gates have fixed starting and ending points and consume high maintenance fees, the principal's spatial teleportation can freely change the departure and arrival points and can be cast at any time.

In the original work, the vice-principal was the only person who could use spatial teleportation so freely.

'Hmm… '

Not long after, music played by the guest band began to fill the air. The official welcome party was starting.

However, my mind was elsewhere.

When the vice-principal first appeared, my spatial perception expanded on its own, rippling like the surface of water when a stone is thrown in.

When the vice-principal disappeared.

My spatial perception fluctuated greatly. If the previous ripple was like a pebble being dropped, this time it was like a huge rock had been removed.

Spatial teleportation and its observation through spatial perception.

The expansion of the range. A peculiar sensation.

A corner of my mind itched. It was an infuriating feeling, as if I was on the verge of realizing something but couldn't quite grasp it.

Just a little more… a few more observations and I might gain something—

"Hello? You are Lee Ha-Yul, right? If you don't have a group, would you like to join

us?"

"?"

My train of thought was interrupted. The voice that reached me made me lift my head. In the brief moment I was lost in thought, a few cadets had gathered around, drawing my attention.

'Ah.'

The freshmen welcome party.

A culture that has continued so that before the proper training begins, it serves as a final time to relax some tension and fatigue and to share friendships among cadets.

In other words, being a hot topic these days, I am someone who receives both positive and negative attention.

The loner and outcast in me was sweating bullets.

At the same time, Hong Yeon-hwa's offer came to mind. She asked if I wanted her to stay by my side. If Hong Yeon-hwa had been there, maybe they wouldn't have approached me.

'…Should I have accepted?'

As usual, regret came too late.

* * *

The freshmen welcome party proceeded in the usual way. The vice-principal took the stage and announced the start, wishing everyone a blessed year and hoping for the birth of new heroes.

Then just an ordinary party followed.

Cadets in formal or casual attire gathered with acquaintances and chatted.

There were also those who lingered to form friendships between the sexes.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin belonged to the former group. They gathered with a few familiar faces, chatting away, occasionally engaging in serious talk, and sipping drinks…

“So, how did you get involved with Lee Ha-Yul?”

The conversation started with a remark from Shin Seo-yul.

Shin Seo-yul with her bobbing brown hair was playing the role of mood maker alongside Baek Ahrin in this small gathering.

“…Just. We met in the middle, that’s all.”

“For something so casual, your reaction was strange? You treated him like he was a fragile craftwork. Not even our house steward touches artwork with that much care.”

“Maybe it was love at first sight? He really is quite handsome.”

“Crazy b*tch.”

The prelude regarding the special admission student, Lee Ha-Yul, ignited a sparkle in the eyes of the friends around.

“Frankly, rather than handsome, I’d say he’s cute. Like a doll. After seeing all those bulky muscleheads, seeing someone like him is a breath of fresh air.”

“I agree. The moment I saw him, I felt like I had to protect him.”

The girls who said that turned their gaze towards me.

Like lion cubs starved for days, all sorts of malicious gossip tore into me, and Hong Yeon-hwa defended each one beside her. Baek Ahrin, who had been sipping her drink in silence, now tilted her head with a strange smile.

“So what trouble did you cause?”

“What nonsense are you talking about?”

“I just saw some dust on Lee Ha-Yul’s clothes.”

“Ugh…!”

“Yeah, I saw it too. If you look closely, there was a bit on him.”

Hong Yeon-hwa recoiled.

That damn girl has good eyes to have noticed that. I even used magic to clean it off.

‘Snake-like b*tch.’

It’s such a hassle again.

The girl who probably has hundreds of snakes in her belly is once again getting involved just because it interests her.

If it hadn’t been interesting, she would have just let it go.

Hong Yeon-hwa narrowed her eyes at Baek Ahrin.

“…We bumped into each other on the way here. What, you got a problem with that?”

“A problem? Why are you speaking so harshly? I was just worried you might have done something rude~”

“Hmph…”

Damn right, I did something extremely rude. Not only did I knock over someone who is visually impaired, but I also picked a fight asking if he couldn’t see…

“Our Hong Yeon-hwa may be rough in her speech and actions, but she isn’t a bad person, right? I was just asking in case~”

“Does it sound like that to you? Are you having a good time now? Huh?”

“Oh, why would you say that? I’m just worried about a friend.”

Baek Ahrin deftly brushed off the accusation with a smile while her friends giggled quietly.

Hong Yeon-hwa ground her teeth internally.

“So? What kind of person was he?”

“…What do you mean what kind of person. How could I know that from just a brief meeting?”

What kind of person, indeed. It’s obvious who she’s referring to.

Lee Ha-Yul. The hot topic, the first special admission student.

Hong Yeon-hwa recalled the memory.

The incident that happened on the way here. A clear mistake on her part, yet she apologized without hesitation.

He had grabbed her sleeve and led her here.

Up until a moment ago, he had obediently followed every harsh word she had spat out, hurting her feelings.

His submissive entrance.

His body flinching when she reached out to him.

“……”

She narrowed her eyes.

It wasn’t exactly a normal reaction, although she wasn’t one to talk, being the instigator of the quarrel.

She had seen such behavior when she was at the middle academy and went on activities with her clan.

Although this generation enjoys peace after the declaration of the end of chaos decades ago, it’s not all peace.

Where there is light, there is darkness. Where there is peace, there is chaos.

Chaotic places. Africa, devoured by magical disturbances, had become a monster’s paradise.

Even if not on such a large scale, there were many exposed to darkness within the local societies.

And those most vulnerable to being exposed to darkness are the weak and powerless.

Like a young child.

"…I was the one at fault, so I'm just being nice."

She was uneasy. If she had controlled her impulsive temperament, none of this would have happened.

If Lee Ha-Yul's behavior was an indication that he was actually hurt inside despite seeming okay, she wondered what to do.

Her face revealed a complex emotion, and Baek Ahrin also wiped the smile from her face and nodded pensively.

"Indeed. There are still many harsh gazes."

"That's right. Even if they're keeping quiet, most of them are talking about that topic."

"And there are those who pretend not to but look at you with strange eyes."

The harsh gazes. Even now, Lee Ha-Yul, sitting in a corner passing time, had people lurking around him.

Some approached out of simple curiosity and interest, but there were also those who sneered with dark thoughts like jealousy.

That's why she suggested they stick together. For some reason, though, he had firmly declined.

"Actually, I'm a bit curious too."

"About what?"

"Whoa, look at her reaction. You'd think he was her boyfriend."

When she turned her head sharply to glare, Baek Ahrin held up her hands and stepped back.

“That’s because it’s a first, a true first. A special admission student personally selected by the owner of the cradle. This kind of thing has never happened before, right?”

As Baek Ahrin said, the word ‘first’ kept being emphasized.

“I shouldn’t really say this, but we’re also regarded as having top-notch potential, right? And before us, there were plenty of talented people too.”

The current batch, the 121st, including Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin, is called the golden generation, teeming with talents that are acclaimed as one of the best ever.

The current third-year students, the 119th batch, also have a successor from the Taesan clan.

Aside from one, five heroes who quelled the chaos and ushered in an era of peace were also from the cradle.

And how many of the active superhumans are graduates of Shio-ram?

“Did we really go almost 100 years without a single talented cadet? No, there were a tremendous number.”

With an average of 400 to 500 freshmen.

With Shio-ram being in existence for over a hundred years, there are almost tens of thousands of alumni.

All of them are superhumans who pride themselves on being geniuses.

She was the first to catch the eye of the cradle’s owner, who had otherwise turned a blind eye to so many others.

“Everyone is curious. Just how talented must he be to have caught the principal’s attention? But when you actually see him… we still don’t know~ right?”

“It hasn’t even started yet, what are you talking about.”

“Ahaha. That’s true. Judging by his current appearance and making assumptions is idiotic. But, I thought I would be struck with a realization upon first sight.”

“Struck with a realization, my ass.”

Baek Ahrin’s sentiment was something Hong Yeon-hwa inwardly agreed with. She was curious about just how exceptional one had to be to be given special admission.

‘…But this is a bit much.’

Hong Yeon-hwa looked at Lee Ha-Yul with mixed feelings. She had been ready to rebuke any cadets who were still hassling him, but by now, everyone had disappeared.

Lee Ha-Yul sat in a corner, nodding off, struggling to fight back sleep.

Seeing him like that, she felt a strange sense of pity.

Hong Yeon-hwa also received reports from the clan. As the next successor, she wasn’t short of information.

Among it was information about Lee Ha-Yul.

An orphanage background. His house and parents were lost to a fire, and since his transfer to the orphanage, he had a visual impairment and was very frail, according to the director of the orphanage.

His physical condition wasn’t good, but the orphanage couldn’t afford to provide treatment, and even attending basic educational institutions was difficult.

Moreover, it hasn’t even been a month since he awakened his unique ability.

When Hong Yeon-hwa was one month into her awakening, she was too busy trying to control her unique ability to think about magic tuning.

‘Is it right to leave him unattended after bringing him here?’

A kid who had been living a tough life, blind and mute, is suddenly snatched up just because he has awakened?

And then, despite all that, no apparent measures taken?

Just thrown aside, left to grow on his own?

‘I don’t like this.’

Unbeknownst to her, Hong Yeon-hwa’s thoughts had shifted from concern about talent and potential to worry.

And Baek Ahrin watched this with a peculiar expression.

CHAPTER 8
HOME RUN

The primary purpose of the welcome party is ultimately networking.

In this industry, luck and skill are important, but the presence or absence of connections is just as crucial.

The field where superhumans are active varies, but if we were to pick a representative one, it would indeed be ‘monster subjugation’.

Gambling one’s life to fight monsters, the danger is self-evident.

It’s overwhelmingly safer to form a small party and work together than to act alone, even if it might mean earning a bit less. In fact, it could even be more profitable than going solo.

However, there is a saying among the public:

“Where there are five people, there’s bound to be one piece of trash.”

How would I know whether the person behind me harbors ill will and might stab me in the back?

No matter how much the Association builds a trust system and checks personal information before forming a party, who can predict where life will take us?

‘That’s why connections are important.’

The connections made over the four years leading up to graduation shine when you reunite on the field.

In a rush, it’s more efficient and secure to work with those with whom you’ve built a rapport over a long time, rather than with someone you’ve just met.

That’s why Shio-ram encourages networking. Besides, if you have been accepted into

Shio-ram, you're almost guaranteed to have potential.

I should have been building my standing with my classmates here as well.

Even if I had decided to go soloing, raising my favorability with others wouldn't hurt. If help is offered, there's nothing to lose.

'…I'm tired.'

In the game, all it took was a few clicks of the choices, but now I have to go around myself, or react in real-time and face-to-face with those who approach me.

Moreover, most come from prominent families and seem eager to extract information during conversations, which makes it all the more tiring.

The label of 'special admission student'. Despite the skepticism, considering the chance of hitting the jackpot, I've managed to fend off those trying to build early connections and have now escaped to the bathroom.

'…Should I head back?'

Attendance at the banquet is mandatory, but there's no rule that you must stay until the end. There are probably a few who just stopped by and left early.

With my spatial perception in this state, I can't confirm everyone. But I could distinguish a few people by gender, physique, and especially by the nature of their magic.

I stayed only to observe the main characters who gathered, but there's no longer any reason to stay. Precisely, I was too tired and wanted to go in.

Checking that the bathroom was empty, I took off my gloves.

After carefully examining the water faucet and distinguishing between hot and cold water, I washed my hands with warm water.

Ever since I got scalded by the sunflower showerhead last time, I've been extra cautious when using the faucets.

– Thud

As I walked out of the bathroom,

someone bumped into my shoulder. Fortunately, it wasn't a heavy collision, and I only staggered a bit, but it was close to me rolling on the floor for the second time that day.

"Tsk."

The person who bumped into me clicked their tongue as if to make sure I heard, then disappeared down the opposite corridor without any apology.

Was it a mistake, or was it intentional?

If this was my first time experiencing such an event, I would think it was a mistake, but after several similar incidents, I'm leaning towards the belief that it's some kind of malicious harassment.

"Ugh."

Before I could say anything, the person vanished, leaving me hanging. Shaking off the absurdity, I sighed deeply and moved on.

'…At least the force was weaker than this morning.'

Comparing the two shoulder bumps, I realized just how kind Hong Yeon-hwa's actions were.

One was a light shoulder bump, and the other was a full-body tackle by Hong Yeon-hwa…

Despite Hong Yeon-hwa's fiery temper, her nature leans towards goodness.

And thinking about it, the person just now might not be all that bad either.

They didn't spit at me, nor did any punches or kicks come flying my way. They didn't grab my hair and swing me around.

More than anything, judging by the level of inner magic, if they had hit me with intent, my shoulder could have been torn off.

Compared to those bastards from the past, maybe this level of behavior is considered nice.

– Aaahhh…!

– Hey, hey, you…!

–… Can't… see…

"?"

A noisy commotion reached my ears.

The noise was coming from the center of the banquet hall. Was there some kind of trouble? I hurried towards where the banquet was in full swing.

– Crash…!

"Ugh…!"

"Haha! What's wrong? Your swordplay has slowed down!"

With that, I expanded my spatial perception and saw Hong Yeon-hwa swinging her sword vigorously on stage.

– Sssszzzssh!

In the blink of an eye, swords clashed and parried repeatedly. Along with the clear sound of impact, the male cadet dueling Hong Yeon-hwa frowned and took a step back.

He tried to compensate by increasing his mana, but as if it were futile, Hong Yeon-hwa's sword moved first.

– Clang!

– Clang clang clang!

The flamboyant sword dance. Even the exclamations and cheers flowed from below the stage.

‘Ah, there was such an event too.’

Standing there dumbfounded, I managed to dredge up some locked-away memories.

I had forgotten due to being preoccupied with other matters. When the freshmen welcome party was really heating up, a few main characters would engage in friendly sparring as a way to build camaraderie.

Hong Yeon-hwa, with her battle-hungry personality, was almost certain to participate… and usually, her opponent would be Baek Ahrin or Katsuki Yusei from the Three-Sword Style clan.

Katsuki Yusei is a leading character who is a member of the Japanese clan Three-Sword Style (劍三形) and possesses a unique ability related to swordsmanship.

‘I was startled.’

Frightened by the sudden swordfight, upon closer observation, I noticed that the magic wasn’t being expelled outside the body but was contained within for physical enhancement. The weapons themselves were wooden swords for practice.

More than anything, both sides were not using their unique abilities at all.

My heart, which had been racing, calmed down, and I focused intently on the audiovisual information.

‘…Wow, how do they move like that?’

I found myself impressed without realizing it.

The sword strikes several times in the blink of an eye and is immediately followed by a fluid transition to the next movement, eliciting my admiration.

Even if I were to be trained, if someone were to land such sword strikes on an ordinary person, wouldn’t something burst?

‘When will I ever be able to do that… ’

The initial admiration turned into horror, and then I naturally felt appalled at the thought that I would have to reach that level someday.

'…No, don't feel dismayed. I can do it.'

I shook off the deflating emotion vigorously.

Thinking about it, am I not in a much more advantageous position than them? Even though it's a game, I have knowledge about the future, and while most people have one innate unique ability, I possess three.

Plus, I've unfortunately inherited three curses, but if I solve these, it would be as if I have no negative factors working against me.

'I can do it.'

I will resolve the curses and enjoy a happy hermit life.

As I made the promise for who knows how many times, I continued to observe the sparring closely.

The swords collided with a solid sound, and at times they clashed several times in quick succession, creating a brief and rapid noise.

Watching the back-and-forth duel, I felt something strange.

A layman with no relation to combat like me, what could I possibly perceive from watching that? But as I concentrated on my spatial perception, I realized I was gaining a lot.

'What is this?'

An outsider who has never experienced proper training. These past few days, I've only memorized basic texts, mostly on magic, so I know even less about martial arts.

My spatial perception, which can collect an extraordinary amount of space within the observed area, dissects every aspect of their fight.

The momentum is readable.

Grip technique. Why do they hold the sword that way? Why do they bother to create openings with their attacks? Why don't they push through at certain moments?

At first, I couldn't come up with an answer. Question sheets with no solutions piled up.

But gradually,

I began to mark my own answers.

Swinging the sword lightly to create openings. Light but not weak. Not a single strength but several weaknesses strung together to take advantage.

'Why can I read this?'

I wondered.

Of course, I possess the unique ability known as Jack of All Trades.

Although not reaching the peak in any one field, it's a versatile ability that allows me to reach above average in almost all areas.

That versatility includes 'swordsmanship' as well. I must have an aptitude for swords, so it's not strange that I can read and analyze them.

But it seems I'm reading them too easily.

There's a difference between information perceived by spatial perception and visual information.

The eyes can't recognize speeds beyond dynamic vision. Spatial perception is similar. However, information taken in by spatial perception is securely stored within me.

Information accumulates. More and more reference material is available.

And it's not just that. I can feel how the clear azure and blazing red magic emanate from their bodies and how the magic forms a rigid structure within them.

Magic Affinity.

'Ah.'

That's when I realized.

These three abilities are organically connected.

Through spatial perception, I'm receiving the world more deeply, aided by the adjustment of Jack of All Trades.

And with Magic Affinity, I can feel the flow of magic, which would normally be limited to space.

The same goes for other aspects. Abilities are interlocking, creating a synergistic effect.

The linkage of the three abilities. It was an epiphany.

'Was I wrong?'

Honestly, I thought choosing Jack of All Trades might have been a mistake. Isn't a versatile ability rather mediocre?

The saying goes, 'A quail trying to follow a swan will tear its legs.' When digging one well is barely sufficient, how could dabbling in multiple areas lead to success?

But considering the current phenomenon, I might have been wrong.

'If used properly, this… '

A thrilling excitement surged through me as though my hair was standing on end.

Simultaneously, my spatial perception began to fluctuate wildly, then started flickering.

Information switched off and on. As if the world disappeared and reappeared with the light being switched on and off.

There's a change happening with my spatial perception.

In the midst of this, the friendly duel was approaching its climax.

It was Hong Yeon-hwa, who had driven her opponent back throughout the duel with a satisfied smile, who sent Katsuki Yusei flying.

“Guh…!”

An attack that found its target in a moment of weakness during a defensive posture. Before being flung outside the stage, he managed to find his footing.

But Hong Yeon-hwa wasn’t one to miss that opening. She swiftly kicked off the ground and pulled her sword-bearing arms back.

A full-powered strike. The motion was so large that normally, it would be easy to avoid, but for Katsuki Yusei, whose stance had crumbled, it was impossible.

The sword drawn back. It flew forward, tracing a large arc as if swinging a bludgeon.

“Last one—!”

A spirited shout. Yusei clenched his teeth and thrust his sword forward.

– Boom!

With a sound like a cannonball hitting its target, Yusei’s body, unable to fully deflect the blow, was launched like a baseball.

‘Wow.’

How powerful must the strike have been to send a person flying like that? Amidst the exhilarating rush, as I stood in awe with my mouth open, Yusei’s body, shot like a projectile, headed towards the wall…

?

‘Uh.’

What is that? My thoughts paused as I saw Yusei’s body, flying directly towards the center of my spatial perception.

“Kyah! This… Gee, uh, uh? Oh sh*t, wait a minute…!”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s frantic shout. The noise from below the stage. Gradually, that object, coming closer to the center of my spatial perception… closer to me.

Ah, I see.

It’s flying straight towards me, isn’t it?

I was too engrossed in the excitement to notice it.

I moved reflexively to dodge, but this frail body didn’t respond as I thought it would.

Shockingly, there was no one around me. In other words, no one to help.

‘Oh shi—’

Collision. Consciousness drifted away. It was as if stars twinkled in front of my unseen eyes.

But strangely,

beyond the fading consciousness, I saw the vision of a tearful Hong Yeon-hwa rushing towards me.

Her red hair seemed to burn as it fluttered around her.

CHAPTER 9
DREAM (1)

I blinked my blurry eyes. The sight before me was like looking through a window on a rainy day, but what was clear was that I could see in front of me.

Wondering what was going on, I looked around.

Here and there, dusky mold flourished amongst the worn wooden furniture. Empty liquor bottles littered the floor, alongside black trash bags tied up carelessly.

A cold wind that felt like it could slice through flesh blew through a broken window, and from somewhere, angry shouts and screams could be heard.

I stared blankly at my surroundings before turning my head. In that corner, I saw insects busily scurrying about.

A stench wafted into my dull nostrils. It was a revolting smell created by dozens of filthy scents that were hard to describe.

The scene, noise, and stench were all too familiar.

'Ah.'

I blinked absentmindedly. Now that I thought about it, it had been a while since I last blinked. Ever since I entered the game world, I had just kept my eyes closed.

This was my old home.

Then this must be a dream.

As soon as I realized it was a dream, the moments before I passed out came flooding back.

The tackle from Hong Yeon-hwa and her apology.

Baek Ahrin, whose smirk was frightening.

The freshman welcome party that had somehow started.

The countless attentions I received.

The petty jealousy and envy.

The duel between Hong Yeon-hwa and Yusai… the supporting characters.

The synergy effects of spatial perception, Jack of All Trades, and magic affinity.

The electrifying exhilaration and the flickering spatial perception.

And lastly, Yusai's body, launched like a baseball, crashing into me…

'Ugh… '

I was dumbfounded. A sigh emerged from deep within.

Of all the unlucky things, to have Yusai flying at me. And just when I was concentrating on spatial perception…

I felt like I was on the verge of some enlightenment. And to pass out at that moment. It felt like the world hated me.

Or maybe it's Hong Yeon-hwa who hates me. Either way, it's a situation that only makes me sigh.

What's even worse is, I'm dreaming about this crap.

'Ah, screw it.'

Is this the only kind of dream I can have? Aren't there other episodes? I've heard that dreams are usually about stimulating memories.

…Now that I think about it, the most powerful memories were from my childhood, so it was indeed the stuff of nightmares. Although there were some spectacular memories afterward, nothing compared to childhood.

“Cough, cough…!”

Just as I was about to let out a deep sigh, my throat felt like it was blocked, and a dry cough burst out. Through the hazy vision, my skinny arms and legs came into view.

It seemed to be my childhood body, with its scars and marks still present. And along with that, my bony outlines were starkly visible.

But there was no burn on my right arm, so it must be before the fire incident.

‘…So, how do I get out of here?’

The strangely familiar scene was fleeting.

I tilted my head, looking around.

Usually, when you become aware it’s a dream, don’t you get thrown out? I remember reading stories on the internet about people who realized they were dreaming, only to have every character in the dream turn to look at them, giving them the creeps and waking them up.

– Boom! Boom!

Just then, the door shook violently.

– Boom! Boom! Boom!

The rusty iron door screamed with a stupidly loud knock, as if it was about to fall off its hinges, sounding like castanets being played.

“Ah, dammit. Hey! Come out! It’s been days past the deadline.”

Judging by the ruckus outside, it seemed to be a loan shark. Since my biological parents borrowed money left and right, visits from loan sharks were almost like regular events.

At first, the loan sharks would turn back after dropping a warning, as my biological parents would kowtow at a right angle. But as their patience wore thin, they started to become increasingly rough.

“Hey, this won’t do. Break the door.”

“What? Do we really have to, boss? Breaking is easy but fixing is hard.”

“Why should we care? They’ll figure out how to fix it themselves.”

– Bang!

The knocking ceased. But not long after, a noise twice as loud followed, and the doorknob shook crazily.

‘Really… ’

How much did they have to eat up before they resorted to breaking in? Technically, they were my parents, but they were idiotic, stupid, and vile people.

And I was an even bigger fool for hoping for their affection.

It was too late when I realized that.

– Bang!

“Wow, they sure picked a solid house. It’s damn sturdy.”

Crash! I always hated the sound of knocking from my childhood. Whenever someone knocked on the house door, it meant bad things for me.

–… Huh?

I hated the worn-out door. It couldn’t protect me from the outside world at all. Instead, its creaking and groaning instilled a deep fear in me.

– Ouch…

Crash! The vibes were strong enough to make the walls tremble. A tower of beer cans on one side collapsed with a clatter.

The insects that had been moving busily scattered away in the tide of beer mixed with cigarette ash.

– Clunk.

…The doorknob, which had been moving frantically, suddenly stopped. Soon after, the twisting doorknob broke into two, falling to the floor.

– Yula…

Where the doorknob used to be, a hole was now gaping. Through the open gap of the door, I locked eyes with a black marble.

“There’s only a kid here?”

“What? Those bastards run up a debt and now they’re skulking around somewhere?”

Ah, it’s that time.

The moment when, because of the mounting debt and the loan sharks’ visits becoming a daily event, my so-called parents abandoned me and took off.

The black marble disappeared. The rusty hinges cried out.

The door creaked open──

.

.

.

“─Hayul!”

“…!…?!”

A sound that hit my ears hard awakened my consciousness. My body was being gently shaken by someone holding onto my shoulders.

The sensation of a soft bed pressed against my back. As I became aware of the trembling of my mind, spatial perception unfolded, and information flooded in.

Red, orange, white, and green.

‘Ah.’

It was different from before. It was not the black background with green outlines painted over it.

The orange glow of sunset piercing through the curtains outside the window. The white and yellow petals and green stems of flowers bottled in that sunset light. The uniquely white space of a clean hospital room.

The variety of colors was enough to elicit an inward gasp of awe.

And Hong Yeon-hwa, who was holding onto my shoulders and yelling with urgency…

“—Hayul! Are you awake?!”

‘What?’

Right now, I’m lying in a hospital bed, but why is Hong Yeon-hwa halfway on top of me, yelling?

“Hayul-ah! Are you okay?! Breathe! Breathe!”

“…!?…?”

Breathe? What does that mean? Confused, I tried to move, but my body wouldn’t respond. My chest felt tight. Something was wrong…

“Ugh, cough…!”

“Hayul…!”

Ah, I’m not breathing right now.

The moment I realized it, my throat felt choked. I could neither exhale the air filling my chest nor take in new air.

“Ugh…! Ack…”

What’s going on with me? Why is this happening all of a sudden? My stomach churns. My breathing isn’t working properly.

Before I could find the answer to my question, Hong Yeon-hwa, who was looking down at me restlessly, suddenly hugged me.

Her unexpected action made my body stiffen.

“It’s okay! You’re okay… inhale, then exhale…”

“Cough…”

“Right. Once more…”

My body, which had been rigid, relaxed at the touch of her warmth. It was as if I had been submerged in warm water, the heat spreading throughout my body.

Hong Yeon-hwa was supposed to have a high body temperature, according to the setting. But even so, this seems too high.

Puzzled, I realized the truth. It wasn’t that Hong Yeon-hwa’s temperature was high, but rather my own temperature was very low.

“Again, inhale…”

Hugging me tightly, she softly whispered into my ear, guiding my breath. I slowly inhaled.

Then exhaled again.

A behavior that should come naturally, yet it felt so laborious. It was like having a large rock sitting on my chest.

My body was too cold. A fear of being frozen solid and shattering engulfed me.

Without realizing, I hugged the blurry figure in front of me tightly. The soft touch that enveloped me brought a sense of comfort I had never felt before.

“Uh, hmmm…?”

“It’s okay.”

It felt as though, if I stayed wrapped up in this place, I would always be protected. It

was a comfort that I had never experienced from the creaking iron door.

“Ugh… hoo… huk, hoo…”

“It’s okay. Everything’s okay…”

As I caught my breath, Hong Yeon-hwa kept whispering quietly into my ear that it was alright. At some point, her hand had carefully moved back to stroke my head.

My body, which felt like it was choking, gradually calmed down. My disjointed thoughts began to connect intermittently.

“Hoo… haa…”

“Are you feeling better…?”

As I managed to regulate my breathing, I observed Hong Yeon-hwa. She was hugging me tightly, looking down with eyes dripping with worry.

‘Ah.’

The hue and brightness.

Things I had forgotten for about ten days.

And even now, at this moment, I’m not truly seeing with my eyes, but through the information gained by spatial perception.

But…

As if I had become delicate fingers, the rich red hair fell gently on my face. The sight of it blending with the orange glow of the sunset was too beautiful to be considered just a painting.

Her eyes flickered, eyes that could be compared to rubies crafted with great care by the world’s finest jeweler.

…The world, restored with color, was incredibly beautiful.

CHAPTER 10
DREAM (2)

I've felt warmth many times before.

Ever since I started living on my own, I always fell asleep wrapped in a thick blanket.

Even if it meant going hungry for days, I'd crank up the boiler during the cold winter.

I bought a good quality comforter for coziness. It might have been considered a luxury, but I didn't regret it.

I used the best fabric softener, and I always kept a diffuser on hand.

So, I always slept in a good bed.

But I had never felt this kind of warmth before.

My face buried in Hong Yeon-hwa's chest. Even through her clothes, the warmth and softness were transmitted vividly. This was the first time in my life that I had been held by someone.

The hand gently stroking my head conveyed an emotion that was hard to describe. This too was a first. I didn't remember ever being stroked on the head…

'……'

My mind was hazy.

I just numbly felt the warmth and the touch, then lightly patted Hong Yeon-hwa's back, as if to signal that I was now okay.

With a dazed expression, Hong Yeon-hwa looked puzzled.

"Huh…? Ah, ah!"

It seemed she finally realized our position and made a startled attempt to leap up but then hesitated and carefully laid me down before flopping down onto a chair herself.

Upon closer inspection, her eyes, hair, and face were all flushed with an indistinguishable color.

'…What happened?'

While Hong Yeon-hwa fanned her face to cool down, I checked my own condition.

I was in a terrible state. My whole body was drenched with sweat. My clothes and even the bed were soaked through.

I tried to comb back my sweat-laden hair and pondered the situation, but I couldn't understand why this was happening.

"I'm glad you're feeling better…"

Hong Yeon-hwa, whose face had returned somewhat to its usual look after fanning herself, wiped the sweat from her forehead.

"While you were asleep, you were moaning in agony, so I stayed by your side… but then you suddenly stopped breathing at the end, and I was really scared."

"……"

"Did you… have a bad dream?"

Hong Yeon-hwa asked cautiously and with concern about the dream, and I wore a blank expression.

'Moaning in agony?'

I didn't think that in the dream. Was something painful enough to make me gasp? It wasn't. Even if I took the memories from my childhood strangely, it wasn't shocking enough to stop my breath.

A dream is just a dream.

At most, it's a repeat of the past, not my current situation. The past can't harm me now.

I overcame that damned past long ago. The pathetic parents are dead and gone, they can't touch me anymore. Loan sharks also can no longer find me and harass me.

Furthermore, the world has changed. Even if by a one-in-a-thousand chance, they cannot find me and interfere.

So, what is there to be afraid of?

Absolutely nothing can harm me.

"By the way, do you remember what happened right before you fainted?"

While I was calming my insides, a voice came from beside me, causing me to reflexively turn my head. Hong Yeon-hwa was looking over with a gloomy expression.

I nodded, and she buried her head deeper, exuding twice the gloom.

"…I'm really sorry. It's all my fault."

The apology followed.

"I was too excited and didn't see around me… No, that's not it. Sorry, that was an excuse."

Seeing her usually confident demeanor gone, replaced by rambling, she seemed to be not in a normal state either.

I silently shook my head, then a thought struck me, and I projected a hologram from my smartwatch.

[It's okay. You've already apologized.]

Thanks to the normalization of my spatial perception, I could see the hologram projected by my smartwatch.

"…Sorry."

Looking blankly at the hologram, Hong Yeon-hwa apologized again with a dejected expression. It made me wonder.

Right before the welcome party, was it deliberate when she knocked me down? I'm not sure. But according to her, it was a mistake, and she apologized.

The duel at the end of the welcome party, when she flung the duel opponent at me like a baseball? That was a mistake too, and she's apologizing now.

But why is she acting like this? As if she'd made an irreversible mistake, with a dejected look as though I hadn't accepted her apology. I didn't understand.

Dark thoughts kept surfacing. My thinking was skewing in a negative direction.

[Why are you sorry?]

"Huh…?"

Above all, I didn't quite understand why she was apologizing.

[With your background, shouldn't you be able to ignore such trivial matters?]

Was it a mistake? Just apologize and move on, right? If she doesn't accept the apology? Well, what can I do… Can I, someone like me, do anything to Hong Yeon-hwa?

If it was intentional. Intentional harassment… Similarly, could I possibly stand up to her?

The heir to the Gop-hwa clan.

Not just a mere collective of superhumans, but one of the pinnacle clans that effectively control the nations situated at the forefront of the current world powers.

She's that heir. Later on, she would become one of the world's most powerful figures.

And if she simply realized her already confirmed potential, she would become a top-tier power user… So why does she need to show such an attitude towards me?

'Special admission student.'

The first student to be personally selected by the chancellor of Shio-ram.

Thinking about it, maybe it's because of that title.

The label of 'special admission student' is a tag that brings envy and jealousy, but at the same time, it's a shield for being chosen by the chancellor.

Even if I couldn't do anything about petty and murky harassment, would it be because seriously trying to kill me could incur the wrath of the chancellor?

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been staring blankly at the hologram I uploaded, suddenly reached out and grasped my cheeks firmly. The warmth transferred to my cheeks, bringing a sense of reality.

"?"

"Hayul-ah."

She pressed my cheeks with her palms, making my lips pout out like a fish. Seeing myself with my lips pouting out through spatial perception, I looked utterly ridiculous.

As I dumbly pouted my lips, Hong Yeon-hwa looked pitying… but at the same time determined as she spoke.

"It's only right to apologize when you've done something wrong."

"……"

"I don't know exactly what environment you were in. I don't know what you've been through, what you've lived."

She bit her lip, indicating something didn't sit right with her as she continued.

"What I do know is that I've wronged you. That… I initially pushed you over, said hurtful things, and now, I've caused you this trouble."

"……"

“I’m really sorry.”

It’s only natural to apologize when you’ve done something wrong.

As I heard those words, my hazy mind seemed to awaken in an instant. It was as if a fog had been burnt away, giving me a sense of liberation.

My disjointed thoughts finally started to function properly.

‘Oh, oh… ’

I became aware of the foolish things I had been doing.

An indescribable embarrassment overwhelmed me.

I had awoken from the dream and hadn’t resisted Hong Yeon-hwa’s embrace. Instead, seeking warmth, I had burrowed into her embrace…

Asking why she was apologizing, why she felt sorry, spouting such foolish words, and then hearing the obvious admonishment…

My face flushed with blood. Just a moment ago, my body felt as cold as a frozen fish, but now it was warm above the neck. It felt as hot as a heat pack might be.

“Ah, did it hurt?”

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been pressing down on my cheeks, saw my reaction and asked if it hurt, which made me even more embarrassed.

Startled, she relaxed her hand and the gentle touch stroking my cheek felt both grateful and embarrassing…

[No, it didn’t hurt. I suddenly got a fever. Honestly, I’m not hurt.]

“You mean it didn’t hurt? That’s good…”

Hong Yeon-hwa, who seemed worried that I might have been in pain, placed a hand on her chest and let out a sigh of relief. Watching her, I was enveloped in a strange empathy.

There had been no such scene of Hong Yeon-hwa in the original work.

The record holder for the most villain eliminations certified by the Association.

The embodiment of Gop-hwa and the maddening flames, who would burn everything, including herself.

A relentless warrior who would confront even a second-tier monster without giving an inch.

To the player, Hong Yeon-hwa was such a character. I saw her goodness and the positive evaluations from those around her in the sub-stories, but they didn't resonate with me.

To a player, Hong Yeon-hwa was merely an endlessly annoying enemy when choosing an evil route.

I chewed on my lip. I was about to blurt out words of gratitude when I remembered the curse of silence and closed my mouth.

[Thank you.]

"I've said it before, but it's my fault. You don't have to be thankful."

Hong Yeon-hwa shook her head and looked at the smartwatch.

"It's already this late. How are you feeling? Should I take you back to the dormitory? Or you could stay here and go tomorrow. I don't have any plans for tomorrow."

[I'll stay here then. I don't have the energy to go to the dormitory.]

The truth was, I was still feeling dazed. Maybe it was because my spatial perception had changed, but my head was throbbing.

Maybe it's because there's more information with the addition of colors and contrasts. It seemed like it would take some time to adapt.

I buried my face deep into the pillow. The soft touch snugly enveloped my face.

But it was rougher than before.

…Recalling the sensation of burying my face there earlier, I felt my temperature rise. I turned over so my face wouldn't be visible and pressed it down firmly.

My mind drifted away instantly. I was more tired than I thought… I… more…

* * *

"He's fallen asleep."

The orange glow of the sunset streaming through the window bathed the infirmary.

Inside the infirmary, a heavy silence flowed quietly. Only the occasional knocking of the wind against the window made any noise.

On the bed.

There lay Lee Hayul, who had fallen asleep, breathing comfortably.

His face half-buried in the pillow, he seemed to be deeply asleep by the steady rhythm of his breath.

"Phew…"

Hong Yeon-hwa stared blankly at him for a moment, then caught herself and let out a deep sigh. She had been watching him for a while in case he had another nightmare, but there didn't seem to be any sign of that.

'Is that… a relief?'

Hong Yeon-hwa massaged her forehead as she reminisced about a few hours earlier.

She had been absorbed in the duel.

Pushing over Lee Hayul and spewing harsh words. The fault was clear.

Lee Hayul was a unilateral victim, and Hong Yeon-hwa was the offender. She knew that, but still, the stress accumulated.

Apologizing was not enough, was it? When should she apologize again? Should she offer some compensation along with the apology?

Such trivial concerns. Even during the welcome party, these thoughts revolved in her mind. Then came the offer of a friendly duel.

The opponent was a promising Japanese participant. Not only was his skill decent, but he also happened to use the sword, so she quickly accepted, hoping to lift her mood.

Losing? She hadn't thought of it. And indeed, that's how it went. She enjoyed the duel as fun, and she never lost the upper hand.

After driving him to the end, she finished the duel with a satisfying blow.

…The problem was that the one struck by that blow ended up crashing into Lee Hayul.

While she was feeling the exhilarating thrill of victory, Lee Hayul collided with the opponent and lost consciousness.

Even now, thinking about it made her head turn blank as if crumpling a white sheet of paper into her brain, cutting off her thoughts.

Put yourself in Lee Hayul's shoes.

In the morning, she pushed him over and picked a fight, asking if he couldn't see in front of him.

Then she apologized, saying she was sorry and that she would make it up to him later, asking him to tell her if he needed anything.

Just looking at this would make her seem like an ordinary crazy woman.

But… having apologized like that, she didn't even wait a few hours before flinging her duel opponent at him, knocking him unconscious.

The same person who had pushed him down in the morning and picked a fight with him! In just a few hours! Again!

"Gulp…"

'Apologizing for a mistake is the right thing to do,' she had said with some semblance

of pride, but inside, she was sweating coldly.

From Lee Hayul's perspective, he could see it as malicious torment meant to deceive him, and he wouldn't be able to argue against it…

Clear grudges and debts.

Full of neither favor nor resentment, abundantly.

The family motto passed down since the clan's founding.

It was a belief that every member of the Gop-hwa clan carried in their hearts, and despite her prickly nature, Hong Yeon-hwa was also trying her best to uphold it.

She had made a mistake in the morning. Before she could even make amends, she made! The same! Mistake again! To the same person!

Fortunately, the kind-hearted Hayul accepted the apology…

But if he had refused the apology and closed his heart…

"Ugh…"

Hong Yeon-hwa shook her head, brushing her disheveled hair behind her ear.

Of course, she had no intention of treating the apology as a mere formality. She had not only caused inconvenience but also hurtful remarks, so she planned to compensate and apologize several times over.

With that resolve, she got up. Now that she had confirmed he wasn't having a nightmare, she thought it was time to leave.

"……"

As she checked his condition one last time, her eyes inadvertently drifted upwards.

The sunset draped over him like a blanket as he slept, and the combination with Lee Hayul's fairy-like appearance created a scene believable as a painting.

His eyes were round, his face itself fine-lined and smooth. His actions also exuded

fragility, invoking a protective instinct in people.

No wonder female cadets were particularly drawn to him during the welcome party.

Even the feel of his hair was like a drug, making her stroke it absentmindedly.

He had a huggable frame, and he smelled so good…

'What the heck.'

Before she could continue the thought, she slapped her own cheek.

She rubbed her burning cheek.

…Then, as thoughts circled back, stabbing her conscience was the fact that she had pushed over, insulted, and ultimately knocked unconscious a man like him.

"Cough."

After clearing her throat, she turned to leave, but noticed the blanket had come undone. It must have happened when he moved a little in his sleep.

I should cover him up before leaving.

With that thought, she lifted the blanket.

At the same time, Hong Yeon-hwa's body stiffened.

"……"

The infirmary, which had felt warm just a moment ago, was now enveloped by a chilling silence. Her eyes wandered, yet fixated on one spot.

For a warrior, eyes are life. Without eyes, one can't follow the opponent's attacks nor land their own.

As a warrior, Hong Yeon-hwa doubted her own eyes. It was as if her brain refused to accept what she was seeing.

Her body turned to stone. Her breathing became ragged, and her chest felt tight with

dizziness.

She wanted to just walk away. But she couldn't.

Her intuition screamed that it was not the right thing to do.

Hong Yeon-hwa reached out with trembling hands.

Lee Hayul's gloves. She hadn't thought much of them. Maybe they were just for fashion.

But beneath them, beneath the disheveled glove, she saw a scar.

A grotesque burn mark. This much was painful… but understandable. She could think of offering to heal that scar as a gesture of apology.

"…Oh, uh…"

Gop-hwa.

The unique ability passed down from her ancestors.

A flame that burns both the owner and the world, leaving nothing but ashes in its hatred.

Gop-hwa enhances the user's body from within and, when desired, relentlessly consumes the foe without an easy end.

It burns to the last unless it's absolutely necessary to die down. But even then, Gop-hwa doesn't disappear gently.

If it does extinguish, it leaves a terrible scar on the target. It is a kind of brand that cannot be properly erased even by healing abilities.

A hideous mark covering from the fingertips to halfway down the forearm.

Hong Yeon-hwa was very 'familiar' with such marks. She had seen them when facing monsters and even when she eliminated villains.

She had even carved them herself.

"…Gop-hwa."

That was a trace of Gop-hwa.

CHAPTER 11
THE BEGINNING (1)

I hadn't slept properly for the past few days, but last night, I finally slept soundly for the first time in a while.

I had been knocked out by a direct hit from Katsuki Yusai thrown by Hong Yeon-hwa. After waking up, I fell asleep again under Hong Yeon-hwa's gaze.

And then, one thing led to another, and I woke up the next day.

My mind felt clear for the first time in a long while, as if all impurities had been washed away. Feeling refreshed, I bought some daily necessities and returned to the dormitory.

I also spent some time experimenting with my spatial perception.

I comfortably settled down in the middle of the living room and spread my spatial perception as far as it could go. Effortlessly, it encompassed four or five floors above and below.

As I admired the expanse, the issue of privacy crossed my mind, and I quickly dismissed the information.

'It's improved quite a bit.'

There were two major changes to my spatial perception.

The first was the ability to extend the range to about 100 meters in diameter. It was around 30 meters during the welcome party. The range had increased more than threefold in just a few days.

It was a gratifying achievement. Without my eyes, this would now perhaps give me an edge over others.

The second and most significant change was, of course, the change in my vision.

Previously, it was akin to night vision goggles or a radar, a strange view where only the faint green outlines of objects were visible in a world of black.

It had been fine for detecting simple movements, but it was problematic to see people's expressions or holograms.

However, my current spatial perception was almost like that of a normal person's vision. Colors were visible, and I could clearly discern light and shadows.

While it wasn't the god-like vision that pierced through everything I first experienced, this level was still something to be grateful for.

But with improved performance came increased costs.

If I switched to spatial perception (color), the headaches intensified. Clearly, this mode used more resources than spatial perception (radar).

I wasn't particularly worried about this. I had gradually become accustomed to spatial perception (radar), so I figured I would get used to the color mode with continuous use.

'Spatial perception.'

One of the three unique abilities I acquired, even with the… let's say, three restrictions attached.

It's an effect that reads the information of space directly, without using the sensory organs attached to the body.

Although I hadn't yet engaged in proper combat or training, I could feel how powerful this ability was while watching the friendly duels.

There are no blind spots. The field of view doesn't matter. It's about reading space itself. The point of view is irrelevant. After all, everything is read.

But the problem is that this seems a bit… unrefined, isn't it?

Jack-of-all-trades. It's being put to good use. I can feel the difference in various movements in everyday life.

Magical affinity. No issues there. I can feel the magic moving within my spatial perception very clearly. I feel like I could do something about it if I set my mind to it, but for now, I've left it alone. I plan to try it when I receive proper guidance.

Spatial perception… I nearly died the day I received it.

'So damn unfair.'

Even now, thinking back on that time, a sense of injustice welled up inside me.

After all, it was one of the abilities I received in exchange for my eyes, nose, mouth, lifespan, and speech. To nearly die from overload just after receiving it? That's just ridiculous.

The reason for my arrival in this world? I don't know. Who sent me here? I have no idea. What exactly is this world about? I have absolutely no clue.

Just trying to break the restrictions and survive here. I have no intention of digging into or uncovering any secrets of this world.

What's certain is that the way my abilities were given to me seemed haphazard.

Otherwise, my near-death experience wouldn't make sense.

While wallowing in self-pity and fine-tuning my spatial perception, memories of the past caught in my spatial perception fleetingly crossed my mind.

…Especially the incident in the infirmary sometimes made my face burn with shame. My actions at the time were so embarrassing.

First waking up from a nightmare, then struggling to breathe, and getting held tightly and comforted by Hong Yeon-hwa.

Even that would have been crazy enough, but at the time, I must have completely lost it because I hugged Hong Yeon-hwa tightly…

Furthermore, at the time I didn't realize it, but reflecting on the memory, I also buried my face and rubbed against her, committing a very, very… atrocious act.

And then I had the audacity to ask Hong Yeon-hwa, who was apologizing to me, "Why

are you apologizing?" or "With your social status, do you really need to apologize?"…

After being rebutted with the obvious truth, I had my cheeks touched and patted…

'Ugh.'

Anyway, it was a day when I accrued a preposterous amount of embarrassing history.

Every time I handled spatial perception and recalled that memory, I felt like rolling on the floor. Now I had built up some resistance and could end it just by clenching my teeth.

There was an excuse that I had been out of my mind due to an extraordinary amount of stress over the past few days… but that didn't change the fact that it was a shameful history.

Regardless. The changes to spatial perception were a blessing that I should welcome with open arms.

When spatial perception first broke down on the first day, I thought it was the end of the world, but it was great that it recovered faster than expected.

Before, I had to rely on the 'read-aloud' feature to hear with my voice, but now, thanks to the spatial perception that allowed for normal vision, I could also see holograms.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Did you get home okay? (Yesterday 10:28)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: The class assignments and academic schedule will be posted at 12, so check it out (Yesterday 10:29)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: You don't have any plans today, so rest up (Yesterday 10:29)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Remember what I told you yesterday? If you ever run into trouble, contact me anytime (Yesterday 10:33)

'So, kind… '

Looking at the messages Hong Yeon-hwa sent me since yesterday, I felt a mix of emotions, mostly confusion.

The disposition of the original Hong Yeon-hwa, which would remain unknown no matter how many times I forced it.

Fiery personality. A mad dog that doesn't look back once unleashed. More action-oriented than expected, with limbs moving before thought.

Also, after being seriously burned once in the 11th playthrough, my perception of Hong Yeon-hwa was stuck in that state.

Which is why I was even more on guard. To me, Hong Yeon-hwa was an adversary that would draw blood if provoked.

But the Hong Yeon-hwa in the messages… the real-life Hong Yeon-hwa was different.

Although she initially pushed me down and made comments like 'Can't you see?' or knocked out Katsuki Yusai and threw him at me…

She later offered a sincere apology and said she would definitely compensate me on several occasions.

When I had trouble breathing, she physically threw herself to embrace and comfort me.

It didn't feel empty. The apologies dripped with genuine regret, and she kept asking if I needed anything.

By now, I had to admit that my perception of Hong Yeon-hwa was just a stupid prejudice.

I had thought of people as NPCs since I entered this world inside a game.

Despite knowing it was real life, I still moved around as if it wasn't.

I felt guilty for treating a perfectly normal person as a character with a flawed personality.

It was no different from those who hear rumors about someone and judge them, gossipping away.

I need to change my thinking. Being mindful of the original settings is fine, but blind

faith would lead to mistakes like this one.

With that resolution made, I stood in front of a mirror, even though I couldn't see. I still wanted to look presentable.

I was dressed as neatly as possible in the Shio-ram uniform. It resembled the kind of uniform you'd see online.

Its simplicity, without any excessive adornments, was a defining feature.

The fit was comfortable. I thought it might be inconvenient, but it had various convenience spells woven into it, making it incredibly comfortable.

As I ran my fingers over it, it felt as soft as a blanket with great elasticity, stretching easily.

Time passed, and today was the day the first lecture would start.

'Phew… '

The first day of the lecture.

If someone was extroverted, they might be excited about making new friends. If introverted, the thought of meeting strangers would have their heart racing.

I fell into the latter category. My heart was pounding in real-time, proof of that.

Just in case, I checked my outfit one more time before heading out.

I took the elevator down to the first-floor lobby. It was 6:30 AM. Lectures started at 8 AM, and the lobby was almost empty since I had come out early.

At most, there were a few cadets who had come down for an early breakfast.

I settled for a few nutrition bars for breakfast.

Leaving the dormitory, I boarded the bus. It was still odd to see no one in the driver's seat.

The colorful array of colors in my spatial perception passing by lifted my spirits.

Regaining color. It was a sign that I had finally made some progress in this world.

The dormitory was close to the learning district, so it didn't take long to arrive.

I found myself in front of the lecture room door.

[Ipchun Room (立春室)]

Shio-ram divided classes and grades based on the 24 solar terms.

For the first year, there were six spring-related classes:

Ipchun, Usu, Gyeongchip, Chunbun, Cheongmyeong, Gogu.

The same goes for higher grades, which are divided into summer, autumn, and winter.

With an average of 400 to 500 new students each year, there were about 80 people per class.

Ipchun could be thought of as the equivalent of class 1 for the first year.

It was a familiar class. It housed significant characters and was the scene of numerous minor incidents and accidents.

The beginning of spring, the first of the four seasons. Considering that it's where the stories of the main characters start, it's an apt yet curious name.

Taking a deep breath, I cautiously opened the door.

Inside was a tiered lecture hall, common in universities. Given the time, there were few people.

Those few were too busy with their own affairs to pay attention to me.

I took a moment to survey the surroundings with spatial perception and planted myself in a corner seat at the very back.

It was a prime spot farthest from the door, with a window right beside it.

As they say, the early bird catches the worm, and if you want a prime spot, you need to arrive early.

There was also a small anxiety about what if I was late.

There was still time before the lecture started. I turned on the internet lectures I had been watching yesterday on my smartwatch.

As time passed, more and more cadets filled the lecture hall. The buzzing noise was proof of that.

-Press

"?"

Amidst the bustle, I tried to ignore the glances flying my way and was intently listening to the online lecture when a woman crept up behind me and tapped my shoulder.

Turning my head toward her, she pressed her finger against my cheek.

"It's been a while, Hayul."

The woman pressing my cheek was a female cadet wearing a Shio-ram uniform. She had long, straight hair that reminded me of chick down, and the smile on her soft features felt natural.

'Who?'

Her familiarity suggested a close relationship. But I had no memory of forming such a relationship in this world.

I tilted my head in confusion.

The woman covered her mouth in shock as if I had forgotten her.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten me…? It's only been a few days!"

'A few days?'

I had been in the dormitory for the past few days, hadn't I?

As I was about to tilt my head the other way, I sensed the woman and felt an odd sense of dissonance.

Something about her voice was familiar.

And I couldn't quite place her 'color,' but her figure seemed familiar from somewhere…

'Hello? Do you need help?'

Ah.

[Elia?]

I quickly projected a hologram with the memory that came to mind.

I had never seen the full color of Elia, so it took me a moment to recognize her.

But not remembering immediately and appearing confused must have been a shock to her as she looked somewhat sulky.

"Yes. I'm Elia, who helped Hayul but was almost forgotten in just a few days."

[I'm sorry. It took me a while to realize who you were.]

"Hehe, of course, I was just joking. I was just playing around a bit. Did you get home okay that day?"

[Thanks to you, I got home fine.]

Fortunately, she waved off her prank with a playful expression.

"But I couldn't help playing the joke. Hayul's reaction was just too amusing."

[My reaction?]

"Yes, your reaction. The look of utter embarrassment and not knowing what to do was… hehe."

She giggled behind her hand as if it was the funniest thing.

I was indeed at a loss for what to say, but it wasn't quite to that extent.

Regardless of what I thought,

Chattering away as if fitted with a motor, Elia suddenly exclaimed.

"Oh, it's already time."

Checking the time, I saw that the lecture was about to start. Elia, who had also checked the time, waved her hand.

"Let's get along, we're in the same class!"

With that, she hummed a little tune and headed to the front seats, where cadets who appeared to be her friends had saved her a spot.

It didn't take long for them to start giggling and playing pranks, apparently having become close in that short time.

I had anticipated it from her talkative and considerate nature, but she indeed seemed to have good social skills.

– Slide

The time to start the lecture approached, and I turned off the internet class. Around that time, the back door opened.

The person who entered the lecture hall was Hong Yeon-hwa, wearing a red jumper instead of the coat that came with the Shio-ram uniform, almost like a trademark.

'Hong Yeon-hwa is also in the Ipchun class.'

Ipchun, Ip-ha, Ip-chu, Ip-dong.

These are the classes considered to be the first for grades 1 through 4, respectively, and classes with 'Ip (立)' in their name tend to include main characters.

Baek Ahrin and Katsuki Yusai, who played the role of a baseball during the welcome

party, are also from the Ipchun class.

Baek Ahrin had briefly greeted me before taking a seat in the front. Hong Yeon-hwa would probably take a seat next to Baek Ahrin.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin were childhood friends, inseparable and usually mentioned together.

As I expected, Hong Yeon-hwa headed for the seat Baek Ahrin had taken… but she didn't.

After giving Baek Ahrin a quick glance, she trudged toward me.

– Thud

She dropped the bag she carried on her shoulder onto the desk and looked my way.

I noticed her swallow quietly, her nervousness clearly caught by my spatial perception.

"Hello…? Did you rest well yesterday?"

"?"

A question mark floated over my head.

CHAPTER 12
THE BEGINNING (2)

This place is a world within a game, yet it's real.

It's similar to the balance-destroyed game.

There are towers and dungeons that don't exist in reality, as well as magic and unique abilities.

It's a world within a game where it's possible to overturn a city with personal might.

But at the same time, it's also reality.

When a third-tier monster appeared in the collapsing capital of China, millions died, and that vast land was left to rot, poisoned.

If a dungeon erupts incorrectly in a city that was going about its daily life, hundreds of people can die laughably easily.

A single monster's influence can transform an entire continent into a demonic landscape.

If I keep seeing this as just a game, I'll eventually invite disaster upon myself.

This isn't a place where paths are clearly defined like in a game. It's a world where one choice can create countless possibilities.

If there are a hundred people, there are a hundred different lives.

It's a grave misconception and impolite to think of the people here as mere NPCs.

I definitely reflected on this thought this morning.

I'm certain that holding onto this belief will lead to unfavorable outcomes for me in the future, and I've vowed not to make hasty judgments based on game knowledge

from now on.

People are simple yet complicated… They're entities that are hard to define.

"…Want some candy?"

A voice interrupted my thoughts from right beside me. Hong Yeon-hwa hesitated for a moment before extending her hand towards me.

There was a candy in her grip, wrapped in an impressively high-end packaging that was rare to see.

This must be an incredibly expensive candy.

[Thank you.]

I took the candy. I intended to put it in my pocket, but Hong Yeon-hwa's gaze made my body freeze for a moment.

It was a look filled with tension… an apprehensive gaze directed at the candy I'd received.

'Um… '

Still, it felt awkward to just shove a gift into my pocket, so I unwrapped it and popped it into my mouth. Of course, I couldn't taste it.

As I rolled the candy in my mouth, Hong Yeon-hwa's previously anxious face suddenly brightened. It was a dramatic change that anyone would notice.

'…… '

The stares around us were piercing, as if they were witnessing an insurmountable miracle.

Baek Ahrin, who had turned to look this way, blinked her eyes. Her mouth hung open in a dumbfounded expression.

Could such a person really make that kind of face? It was incredibly surprising.

For a moment, Hong Yeon-hwa was the person I had the greatest prejudice against.

Unlike in the original work, I understood she wasn't always fiery-tempered, rash, or dirty.

I realized she wasn't someone to be feared or avoided at all costs.

I understood that she was someone who would seek forgiveness and bow her head if she made a mistake.

But still…

"Does it taste good? It's a kind I particularly enjoy."

[Yes. It's delicious.]

"Really? I have quite a few stocked up. Should I send you some?"

Why she left Baek Ahrin in the front to sit next to me.

Why she keeps glancing over and flinching slightly at each of my actions.

Why she handed me candy with a nervous face, brightened when I accepted it, and then sparkled with excitement when I said it was delicious, asking if she should send more my way… I still don't understand.

If I had socialized more, maybe I would know the reason behind Hong Yeon-hwa's current actions.

With delayed regret, I recalled an internet friend I had somewhat kept in touch with.

Agapansus: Go outside for a change.

Me: I don't want to.

Agapansus: What are you doing cooped up all year? Get some sunlight, some fresh air. Meet people, okay?

Me: I don't want to.

Agapansus: Ah, you stubborn one. I'm only giving advice because I'm worried. You're not going to live on the internet forever.

Me: I'll think about it.

Agapansus. An internet friend I happened to converse with a bit.

Go outside, meet some people, staying cooped up all the time is why you have no social skills, if you come out I'll buy you a meal, and so on…

They were someone who meddled here and there as if they were my guardian.

Now, that friend's advice suddenly struck a chord.

'I should have wandered outside a bit… '

I never knew the consequence of locking myself away, insisting I preferred being alone and comfortable, would come back to haunt me like this.

– Slide

Just then, the front door of the lecture hall opened. I already knew thanks to spatial perception.

My current spatial perception spans 100 meters in diameter and includes colors. It's not only unobtrusive in my daily life, but it actually gives me an advantage.

I feel almost guilty for the consideration I receive for being blind and physically frail.

At this point, my visual condition is much better than that of an average person.

I might as well be a fashion-disabled person. Playing the role of someone appealing for pity, while in reality, I have better conditions than the average person…

That's why, even though I told Hong Yeon-hwa I had no difficulties, and even though I made it clear I felt things very well, her attitude did not change.

Am I viewed by Hong Yeon-hwa as a weakling who could die at any moment?

Regardless, the attention that had been focused on me instantly shifted towards the

front door.

The sound of heels clicked. With a few strides, the one who had ascended the platform was a woman with striking green eyes.

I wondered if everyone resembling a magician in this world wore robes, as this woman was also draped in a large robe.

Having taken her place in front of the lectern, she scanned the lecture hall once and then smiled broadly.

The murmurs that were present since the front door opened ceased. Her presence was extraordinary.

“Hello? I’m Velus Liana, the new professor in charge of the Basic Spirit lecture for the Ipchun class~”

Contrary to the formidable energy she emanated, her voice was cheerful as it spread throughout the lecture hall.

When the professor stated her name, the surroundings buzzed softly.

Keywords like Spirit Master, retirement, and the African demonic landscape.

I knew of her.

Velus Liana. A supporting character occasionally seen in The Tower of Growth’s demonic field, I remember her as holding a top-tier ranking from the association.

A top-tier hero like her would be world-class, capable of engaging in combat with third-tier monsters.

Considering a third-tier could obliterate a city without much effort… one could get a sense of just how monstrous her abilities were.

“I’m ranked 297th among the upper ranks! Just so you know, I’m within the top 0.1 percent!”

Not quite top-tier yet?

Well, it's too early to venture into the African demonic landscape until at least after the second year. Two years is enough for changes.

The students' eyes twinkled at the professor's introduction.

Upper rank, not top-tier. But there was no lunatic who was disappointed by that.

The association, run by the masters of the space and tuning towers, classifies heroes based on their achievements, such as monster subjugation.

There are six rankings: top-tier, upper rank, upper middle rank, lower middle rank, lower rank, and lowest rank.

Among these, top-tier comprises less than 300 people worldwide, and upper rank has fewer than 30,000, if I remember the setting correctly.

Wasn't the total number of heroes worldwide around 5 million?

Among them, she's an upper rank hero within the top 300.

That's more than enough qualification for a Shio-ram professor.

"Although it's tiring to start in the morning, we still have to do what must be done, right? I'm sure everyone has seen the academic schedule announcement, but I'll explain it to you personally as per procedure."

The professor, who claimed to be new, skillfully led the cadets' reactions.

"This semester is commonly referred to as 'free semester,' right? It's a period where you attend various lectures regardless of your major or field."

"I've seen the notice, but I still don't quite understand."

"That's why I'm here to explain it to you!"

Liana responded to a male cadet's question, who didn't seem to understand, pointing at him as if to say he asked a good question.

"In short, a student majoring in close-quarters combat can attend magic-related lectures without any issues."

Free semester.

It's a term I've heard somewhere on Earth before.

It literally means a period when you can attend all sorts of lectures regardless of your major.

There are several reasons why the free semester was created.

For those like me who were admitted purely based on potential but have yet to narrow down their career path.

Even if you've decided on a career, it's also a time to check for any undiscovered potential, and by attending various lectures, you can broaden your horizons… that was the setting.

In essence, it meant to try a little bit of everything.

For someone with the unique ability of Jack-of-all-Trades like me, it's a welcome opportunity.

"During the free semester, there will be common lectures in the morning according to grade, followed by specialized lectures in the afternoon based on ranking."

The professor's explanation was exactly as per the original setting.

In the morning, there were common lectures by class, and in the afternoon, specialized lectures based on entrance exam results.

Shio-ram divides cadets into 'basic,' 'proficient,' and 'advanced' categories based on entrance exam scores.

The level of classes increases in order from basic, proficient, to advanced.

There's no point in getting upset if you're in the basic class because if you have the skills, you can climb to a higher class through testing.

And 'basic' doesn't mean it's a slapdash level. It's basic compared to other classes, but the level of instruction is top-notch.

Special admission students start in the basic class. The same goes for students recommended based on their potential.

It wouldn't be right to push those who haven't properly learned anything yet into proficient or advanced classes.

"Phew… That's it for the announcements!"

Liana, who had been explaining the lengthy academic and exam schedules, The Tower of Growth entrance periods, and the school rules that first-year students should be aware of, sighed deeply after speaking continuously for dozens of minutes.

The process was delayed further due to questions from the cadets.

"The free semester for the first year is famously grueling, isn't it? Let's persevere! You'll have more free time from next semester!"

Liana quickly recovered her composure and wore a playful smile.

"Now, since it's the first day, you all know what to do, right?"

The first day of lectures. Is it usually called orientation?

Anyway, events of this kind are all random, so it was hard to predict anything from the original work.

But I wasn't too worried.

In the original work, it was a simple event that ended with a few lines of text.

Without relying on the original settings, there wouldn't be anything special during the time allocated for the professor's introduction for common or specialized lectures.

At most, they would outline the lectures they were in charge of, re-measure abilities for checking, or share stories from their active days—

"On the first day, it's all about introductions, right? Let's start with the cadet sitting on the right in the first row!"

‘Fuck?’

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.

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Introductions.

Informing newly met people about one’s name, background, and other personal details…

At first, I was taken aback. There was no event for self-introductions in the original work. Not only had I never done a self-introduction, but I certainly had never done so in front of so many people.

However, after giving it some thought, doing a self-introduction wasn’t all that strange. Actually, it might be a standard procedure.

As you know, networking is incredibly important in this industry, and making oneself known through self-introductions could be natural.

What’s certain is that I, who had remained cooped up at home, had no right to judge.

“Hayul, are you feeling unwell?”

[No, I’m fine.]

So there was nothing to fear. There was no need for my stomach to hurt. I just had to stand by the lectern and casually mention my name and characteristics.

It’s an incredibly simple task.

I reassured Hong Yeon-hwa not to worry, as she expressed concern about my pale complexion, and tuned my spatial perception.

Meanwhile, self-introductions continued.

“I’m Katsuki Yusei, majoring in combat. I have a unique ability related to swords. If

you ever want to talk about martial arts, feel free to approach me."

Katsuki Yusei, the one who had flown in during the banquet and knocked me out cold.

"I'm Elia Slade, majoring in support! Let's get along well in the future!"

Already having made many friends, there was a particularly loud applause for Elia.

"Combat major Baek Ahrin here~ I'm currently seeking new friends in real-time!"

Baek Ahrin, who had the backing of a formidable clan, managed to draw positive responses from the cadets with her light-hearted attitude.

Everyone's self-introductions progressed without a hitch. Although still somewhat awkward among each other, there were jokes in between, and above all, Professor Liana stepped in to create a smooth atmosphere.

Most of the cadets had finished their self-introductions.

"Combat major Hong Yeon-hwa. Let's get along well in the future."

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been sneakily glancing this way earlier, concluded her introduction with an indifferent demeanor.

In other words, the turn had finally reached Hong Yeon-hwa, who was sitting next to me.

"Next up, cadet Lee Hayul!"

The previously soft atmosphere suddenly froze in place. Silence spread through the lecture hall, accompanied by a variety of emotions.

'Phew… '

As I stood up, the gazes converged on me. Earlier, they pretended to hide their curiosity, but now, with a legitimate reason, they openly stared.

I walked down the aisle of the lecture hall. Professor Liana, standing on the platform, sparkled with anticipation.

Her eyes were filled with anticipation.

…I had thought there might be some meaning to the self-introductions, but now I suspected that maybe Professor Liana had her own reasons for enjoying this moment.

I took my place in front of the lectern. I could feel the eyes looking at me through my spatial perception.

"……"

Suddenly, my throat closed up.

The feeling of being stared at. I'd experienced it. While walking around the city, in the subway and bus, at the gate terminals, in the commercial district while shopping for daily necessities, and at the welcoming party.

I had been the focus of attention. The center of interest. I had received countless requests for handshakes at the welcoming party. I managed to evade invitations for drinks with excuses.

Now, there was no escape. It wasn't even a bustling atmosphere. In the midst of a silence so profound you could hear a pin drop, I had to speak.

An unspeakable pressure weighed down on my entire body. My head was spinning.

My lips trembled.

Swallowing dryly, I opened my mouth.

"An—"

"—gle, cough! Uggh, ack…! Cough, cough…!"

"Hayul!?"

"Cough, cough…!"

Ah, fuck.

The curse of silence.

CHAPTER 13
THE BEGINNING (3)

There are those who can't perform to their full potential when they're nervous.

Psychologically constrained and unable to remain calm, bizarre mistakes spring from actions that are usually performed with ease.

That's what just happened to me.

After having a fine conversation via hologram until now, why did I try to use my mouth just now?

Having adapted well to communicating through holograms, why did I try to open my mouth?

If I previously managed to deflect attention and gazes, why did I get so nervous this time?

I don't know.

It was just a mistake… There's nothing else I could say.

It was an incredibly foolish mistake.

[My name is Lee Hayul, a special admission student. I'll work hard to prove my qualifications through my results.]

Thank you.

As I displayed my hologram message, I was met with a round of applause.

The reaction was moderate.

It wasn't an overwhelming cheer, nor was it the worst-case scenario of a chilling silence.

– Blind, huh? Guess he can move around because of his perception abilities…

– And mute on top of that…

– Sob…

Instead, I was met with peculiar stares. Some looked dumbfounded… others seemed to witness something pitiable. The murmurs were just an added bonus.

If it had been jealousy or envy, I could have easily brushed it off, but I wasn't sure how to respond to these kinds of emotions. I bowed my head and trudged back to my seat.

"……"

"Cough cough… Alright, that's it for the self-introductions! Since we'll be seeing a lot more of each other, let's not do anything that would make us blush. Next will be…"

The atmosphere, which had turned somber, was broken by Professor Liana with a fake cough as she continued her speech. There was a clear intention to shift the topic.

The phrase 'let's not do anything that would make us blush' felt like a stab through the heart. I was already blushing…

First impressions are so critical, and I completely ruined mine.

Imagine how I must appear to them.

Probably like some weirdo who stood on stage to introduce himself and then suddenly choked and wheezed.

They must think I'm someone who can't even introduce himself properly.

It's a miserable feeling. I felt contempt for myself and wallowed in self-loathing.

"Hayul, are you really okay…?"

[Yes, I'm fine.]

“You’re not just swallowing it down inside, are you…? You have to tell me if you’re in pain…”

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had dashed over when I started choking, also wore a peculiar expression. Her pale complexion contrasted sharply with her red hair.

The gazes that seemed to view me as an invalid only weighed heavier on me…

There was nothing I could say to dispel the odd misunderstanding that had formed.

My face, burning with embarrassment, I buried it on the desk.

“Hayul, are you in that much pain…?”

No, it’s not like that.

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After Professor Liana left, a theory-focused common lecture followed.

The common lectures I attended in the morning were ‘Divine History’ and ‘Basics of Mana Operation.’

Divine History roughly covered the history from 200 years ago, and Basics of Mana Operation taught about the history of mana and fundamental knowledge.

History… Thanks to my knowledge from the original work, there were parts I somewhat knew, but Basics of Mana Operation was difficult.

What I knew was merely about how to develop a character, not how to operate a character’s mana…

Fortunately, the pace started from the very basics, so I could barely keep up.

But the speed of the lecture was incredibly fast. It seemed everyone was just skimming through the content they already knew.

The problem is, I don't know the 'content everyone knows.'

In the original work, you could skip through and just note 'Knowledge +1' or 'Today's lecture is finished' in a single line, but of course, that's not how it works in reality.

I lack common sense right now.

There's a difference in common sense between someone who was born and raised in this world and me, who lived on a Earth without abilities.

To bridge this gap in common sense, I need to attend these theory classes consistently.

I need to attend them for my grades, too.

In the original work, unless there was a significant mishap, you wouldn't get expelled… but in reality, it's not known whether the same rules apply, so I have to manage my grades.

There were many confusing parts, so I planned to review them once I returned to the dormitory.

Looking at the time, it was already a little past 1 p.m.

Since the lecture started at 8 a.m., did each lecture take about 2 hours and 30 minutes?

It's nearly lunchtime. I rummaged through my bag. I'm sure I packed a calorie bar…

"Do you want to have lunch together? I have a lot of recommended places."

[Lunch?]

As I rummaged through my bag, the words caught my attention, and I turned my head.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had already packed her things, was looking my way.

[Aren't you eating with Baek Ahrin?]

“Baek Ahrin? She’s… we’ll eat together later…”

Even though my eyes were closed, Hong Yeon-hwa turned her head away as if avoiding my gaze and mumbled an excuse.

‘Food… ’

Because of the curse of sensory seal, I have no sense of taste.

I’ve conducted various experiments.

I can’t feel the taste of sweetness, saltiness, sourness, and so on. I heard that spiciness is not a taste, so I tried it, but I couldn’t feel spiciness either.

The only thing I can somewhat sense is the fizzing sensation of carbonation? Even that felt alien and was uncomfortable to consume.

From the moment it was categorized as ‘curse,’ questioning common sense became futile.

It’s not that my tongue lacks sensation… but I consider ‘taste’ to be entirely sealed off.

As a result, since coming here, I’ve hardly had a proper meal.

The memories of when my taste was intact only soured my mood further.

[I’m fine with anything.]

The mood sucked, but without taste, I’ve become a scavenger that can gulp down just about anything.

I wasn’t particularly picky before, but there were foods I wouldn’t go out of my way to find.

But now, without taste or preference, as long as it satisfies my nutritional needs, I really can eat ‘anything.’

“Th-that so? Anything at aaaaa… Just a moment…?”

Saying that, Hong Yeon-hwa tapped her smartwatch with an expression of mild confusion.

After much deliberation, she cautiously looked my way.

“Do you want some spicy pork?”

[Sure.]

* * *

The academic facilities have dining halls that provide meals for the cadets free of charge.

I remember the setting stating that despite not charging money, the quality and variety change daily, making it a favorite spot for many cadets.

However, there are cadets who eat separately for various reasons, so there are different restaurants throughout the campus.

The restaurant we found this time was one of those.

Lunch was settled with Hong Yeon-hwa at a nearby place renowned for its spicy pork.

It was a short ten-minute walk away, no need for a bus.

Hong Yeon-hwa and I each ordered a spicy pork set meal.

Before the menu arrived, Hong Yeon-hwa, sitting across from me, initiated conversation with a somewhat timid demeanor. Despite my thoughts, I couldn’t understand why.

It wasn’t heavy conversations like family matters, but she asked about lighter topics, like what I usually liked, whether I watched certain programs, if I liked fruits, and so on…

I didn’t understand why she was asking, but I responded earnestly, and we managed to pass the time suitably until the food arrived.

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes sparkled at the sight of the freshly served spicy pork stir-fry. The soft tofu stew served alongside it shared in the glow.

It was a spicy pork set meal that included both the pork and the stew.

Hong Yeon-hwa swallowed hard and picked up her spoon, and I did the same.

I scooped up a hearty spoonful of the soft tofu stew. The bright red broth, glistening under the light, had an allure that made one salivate just by looking.

I put the spoon in my mouth, and it tasted like warm water.

"……"

I hadn't expected anything else. It was a fact I already knew.

I sighed internally and mechanically worked the spoon. By keeping a decent pace, I managed to match Hong Yeon-hwa's speed.

Whether it was out of politeness or consideration that I might find it difficult to use utensils, there wasn't much conversation during the meal.

"How was it?"

[It was delicious.]

After finishing the meal and while Hong Yeon-hwa was sipping water, she asked me a question to which I casually responded.

"Really?"

Hearing my reply, Hong Yeon-hwa took another sip of water, but I could clearly sense her lips twitching through spatial perception.

…I felt guilty as if I had lied unnecessarily. Should I tell her now that I couldn't taste it? But is it the right timing to bring it up now?

It seemed wrong to keep it hidden… I'll find the right timing to talk about it later.

I'll apologize for lying about the taste then.

After the meal, we split up to attend our specialized classes.

Hong Yeon-hwa left to attend an advanced combat class.

And as for me…

▸Professor Liana: Special admission students have 1-on-1 lectures with a special professor during specialized class time! Arrive at the designated location by 2 p.m.! (Today 13:03)

A 1-on-1 lecture.

I had been informed by Professor Liana in the morning, and I also received the materials via message.

This was different from the original work. In the original, I was integrated into the basic class to study with the other cadets, but here I was to receive special 1-on-1 instruction from a professor.

▸Professor Liana: Sorry about this morning (ᵕ ᵕ) (Today 13:05)

▸Professor Liana: [Royal Candy Voucher]x10 (Today 13:05)

▸Professor Liana: Use these to buy something delicious (Today 13:06)

▸Me: It was my fault. No need for you to apologize, Professor. (Today 13:51)

▸Professor Liana: Really, really sorry! ?(T-T)ノ (Today 13:53)

I received another apology for the incident this morning.

Professor Liana wasn't at fault at all, it was just my nervousness that caused the blunder…

I messaged back that there was no need to apologize, but soon enough, a weeping emoticon came back in reply.

I sighed and thought about the special lecture.

‘Is this better?’

I wondered if being taught by one professor might be better than being one among many students.

When I was first taken in as a special admission, I thought there would be no particular benefits, but perhaps this was a benefit in itself.

After all, it was private instruction from a high-caliber professor of The Tower of Growth.

I walked to the appointed location to digest the food and to contemplate.

Most facilities for first-year students are clustered in one area, so it’s not bad to walk if you have the time.

One might imagine that The Tower of Growth is equipped with state-of-the-art technology.

In fact, it’s true. Just looking at the dormitory buildings, almost everything is automated.

The same goes for the training facilities.

Despite being overshadowed by the existence of the Tower, there are devices augmented with technologies like AR, sparring dummies with movements varying by difficulty, gravity chambers with enhanced gravity, and so on.

All these facilities are equipped with technology unseen anywhere on the former Earth.

‘This is the place.’

The location I arrived at on foot was far from the high-tech facilities I imagined.

Tapping the ground with my toes, I felt a rough texture. It was a hard, parched earth floor where it was difficult to find even a single weed.

The place felt more like an old-fashioned sports field than a training ground. In fact, a white line was drawn around a large open space.

Here and there, the rough marks told me the place was used occasionally. My spatial perception made me even more aware of it.

It wasn't just the ground that was dug up and filled in; I could also read signs of sword slashes drawn in straight lines, areas burned or soaked with water, and spots where the ground was turned over.

It had the feel of an old-fashioned sports field, far removed from cutting-edge technology.

"You're quite early."

"?!"

While I was kneeling and running my hand over one of the straight slashes, a sudden presence behind me and the voice that followed made my hair stand on end.

I gasped in shock and jumped away to create distance. There, just where I had been, stood a woman with her arms crossed, looking at me.

'What the… '

Just a moment ago, she definitely wasn't there. Especially since I was using spatial perception to survey my surroundings, I was even more certain.

"Hmm."

Whether I was confused or not, the woman uncrossed her arms and stepped forward with a robust stride.

Approaching closer, I could tell she was very tall. Almost 180cm? No, she was even taller than that.

I had to tilt my head back to see her face straight on.

"You noticed my presence before I even spoke, correct?"

[Yes.]

It was a subtle difference, but I did catch her presence before she spoke. It was

different from the Vice Chancellor's spatial movement.

With the Vice Chancellor, I had the impression of 'I'm coming in,' and then she tapped into my spatial perception before entering.

But with this woman, it was as if she suddenly appeared lying on my bed at home, watching over me.

"Sensing type. It's been roughly a month since you've awakened, and you've already caught my presence… Not bad."

The woman murmured something, seemingly making a judgement on her own, then nodded as her golden hair cascaded down to her shoulders.

"I'm Atra Clyde. I'll be the professor giving you lessons related to combat specialization."

[My name is Lee Hayul, a special admission student. I look forward to your guidance.]

This was a character I did not recognize. Seeing that she stopped talking, it seemed she had no intention of revealing her rank.

After writing that, I bowed, but I sensed Atra Clyde's eyes narrow slightly at the mention of 'special admission.'

'Ah, this isn't good.'

If the professor is not in favor of special admissions, this could be problematic.

"…Let's clarify something first."

Wondering what was going on, I looked up to see Professor Atra sighing deeply before speaking.

"I don't have much of an opinion about special admissions. I won't blindly deny it, but I won't positively affirm it either."

Atra Clyde narrowed her eyes as she gazed down at me.

“The Chancellor chose you, so I’ll proceed for now, but it’s true I harbor doubts since nothing has been proven yet. You understand? Were you a regular cadet, it wouldn’t matter, but since you’re a special admission, there are extraordinary expectations set upon you.”

Atra Clyde’s piercing gaze seemed to penetrate me.

“Everyone, not just me, the public’s gaze is the same, regardless of the circumstances. You are the first and only special admission chosen by the cradle’s owner.”

First and only.

The reason special admissions garnered so much attention.

I was from the 121st intake. That meant there had been a system in place for 121 years but not a single special admission student until now.

“…I’ve talked too much. It’s time to begin training.”

– Thud thud

Professor Atra walked to the edge of the field and pointed to the ground, where a white line was drawn.

“Run.”

“……”

I followed the white line with my spatial perception. It was the track surrounding the large field.

[How many laps should I run?]

“As many as I say is enough. Or until you pass out.”

Professor Atra nodded slightly.

“It’s a physical endurance test. Since you’re a special admission, there are no recorded data to go by, so we have to measure like this. Ready—”

Start.

Hearing Atra Clyde's nonchalant command, I mulled over my words and then meekly nodded.

It wasn't the kind of class I had imagined, but I guessed this was one method of teaching.

With that thought, I kicked off the ground.

And I ran until I was on the verge of passing out.

CHAPTER 14
TRAINING (1)

How many people have lived without ever running?

Unless someone is born with a problem in their legs, anyone with a body considered ‘average’ by societal standards has naturally run on two legs at some point.

I, too, have naturally run before.

And I was running now.

“Heave, huff…”

I couldn’t see the sun with my eyes closed, but I knew the sunlight was beating down on the ground.

I couldn’t see the clouds floating in the sky, but I could tell there were clouds from the shapes of their shadows on the ground.

I was sprinting along a track that was incomparably larger than a typical school running track.

I’ve heard that a normal school track is about 200 to 300 meters per lap…

But this one seemed to measure in kilometers.

It felt less like a jog around the schoolyard and more like running a marathon.

“Heck, eh-hek… Heck, ugh…”

I moved my legs. While one foot supported me, the other moved forward.

The process was laughably simple, yet it consumed a lot of stamina.

‘How many laps have I done?’

As I ran with legs that felt as heavy as rocks, Professor Atra, who had been standing with her arms crossed, spoke.

“Six laps.”

Even amidst mental exhaustion, her words stuck in my ear.

While I was running, Professor Atra had been leaning against a tree at the edge of the field, watching me.

I didn’t wonder why she was resting while I was going through such hardship.

After all, for someone with her skills, teaching combat at The Tower of Growth, this kind of running was probably negligible.

For her, this was probably as easy as lying down and eating rice cakes.

So, I just kept running.

Gasping for air as if I might pass out any moment, I managed a sarcastic laugh.

I was reminded of myself looking around at the training facilities. Back then, I had wondered how they were used, but now, such thoughts seemed unnecessary.

‘Six laps… ’

Six laps, they say. That’s quite the feat.

I had estimated I would collapse after about three laps based on my rough guess of the track’s size, but I had run twice that and was still conscious.

Moreover, I still had a sliver of strength left. Gritting my teeth, I regulated the breaths that threatened to explode from my chest.

“Seven laps.”

My legs were becoming numb. For the first time, I was glad my vision was obscured. If I had been watching with my eyes, my vision would have blurred and I would have eventually fallen.

“Eight laps… that’s enough.”

“Cough.”

At the sound of ‘that’s enough,’ my legs gave out. My lower body collapsed like a punctured balloon, and my body rolled on the ground.

“Heave… heave… huek…”

I flipped over from my face-down position. It felt like my heart was pounding right next to my ear. Lying on the ground panting, Professor Atra approached from where she had been leaning against the tree.

“Eight laps. Your physical condition is comprehensively the lowest.”

Professor Atra gave a cold assessment as she fumbled in her pocket.

“It’s understandable since you’ve just awakened, but moving forward, you won’t be able to use that excuse anymore.”

She pulled out a bottle of water from her pocket. It seemed to be enchanted with magic, as dew formed on the bottle placed beside my head.

“Setting aside the application of your unique ability and manipulation of mana, let’s focus on improving your physical condition.”

Although my mind was fading in and out, I perked up at the mention of the future direction of my training.

My fingers trembling, I tapped on my smartwatch.

[Phy… sical… con… dition??]

“…If it’s too hard, just listen.”

My fingers were too weak to press properly. After a glance at the hologram, Professor Atra shook her head and advised me to just listen.

“I won’t concern myself with magic since another professor will teach you that later. My part is combat. I will teach you based on close combat that requires physical

prowess. For that to happen…"

Poke-

Bending over, Professor Atra pressed her index finger firmly against my forehead and continued her words.

"Of course, this requires that you have the physical ability to support it. In other words, before you can create fighting techniques, you need to create a body that is capable of fighting. Do you understand?"

[Un… der… stood]

"…Good."

Straightening up, Professor Atra checked the time.

"It took quite long to run eight laps. That's it for today. From tomorrow, we'll start for real, so brace yourself."

Having said that, Professor Atra turned her back and left without hesitation. I remained dazed and catching my breath even after she was out of my spatial perception range.

I must have been lying there for almost 10 minutes, and I still had trouble catching my breath. Shaking, I reached out and grabbed the water bottle.

"Blurgh…"

I poured half of it down my throat while still lying down. Though tasteless, the intense coolness was refreshing.

I dumped the rest of it over my head, cooling my body that had been sweating profusely and overheating.

'I'm exhausted… '

Strength was needed to break the constraints. I had resolved myself, anticipating the pain that would come with the process.

But now that the pain was actually here, there was no denying it was tough.

'It ended early.'

Checking the time on my smartwatch, only a little over two hours had passed.

Or had it really been two hours? Two hours to run eight laps around the field, roughly 20 minutes per lap?

Sure, my pace had plummeted after the first lap… but still, it was an immense amount of time.

I sat up, stifling a groan.

'Oof… '

I nearly moaned without realizing. The moment I lifted my upper body, my whole frame felt so stiff I thought it might break.

Carefully supporting my torso with my arms, I pressed my legs into the ground.

After a lot of struggling, I managed to stand up. A short rest had done me some good. Earlier, it felt like my legs might snap, but now they were just quivering.

I considered heading back to the dormitory but shook my head internally.

It was true my body ached and I was exhausted. I even felt a budding desire to collapse on my bed and sleep, but I still had some free time.

To be exact, my body was at its limit, but my mind was surprisingly alert.

Dragging my shaking legs, I headed to the library.

Having rolled my body around, it was now time to roll my mind over some magic books.

The day was still young.

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I worried I might be extremely sore the next day, but surprisingly, it wasn't too bad. My whole body ached, but it was bearable.

The next day followed a similar pattern to the previous one.

In the morning, I attended theory-focused common lectures. In the afternoon, I went to specialized classes according to rank.

I stamped my attendance early at the lecture hall and received more candy from Hong Yeon-hwa.

I attended the morning lecture after Professor Liana's morning announcements.

Lunch was once again with Hong Yeon-hwa. The problem was that I still hadn't brought up the matter of my lack of taste. It was a difficult topic to broach.

Afterward, I parted ways with Hong Yeon-hwa to attend our specialized classes.

During my specialized class time, I received one-on-one instruction from Professor Atra.

The content was similar to the first day. It ended up being running again.

"Today, we'll aim for ten laps."

"……"

The hurdle had been raised from the previous day. I hadn't even fully recovered from yesterday's exertion.

'Can she not see my legs trembling?' I sent a silent plea. Asking for reconsideration.

"Start."

Regrettably, my desperate gaze seemed to have gone unnoticed since my eyes were closed.

I sighed inwardly and kicked off the ground, nearly collapsing in the process. Relieved, I resumed running around the track.

One lap, two laps, three laps…

'Huh?'

While running in a state of emptiness, I felt a sense of discomfort after passing three laps.

I was tired. My legs hurt. My breathing was rough, and my heart pounded as if it would burst.

But it was better than yesterday.

Yesterday, the pain I felt on the second lap was now only hitting me on the third lap.

"Ten laps… stop."

I finished ten laps. Just like before, as soon as I heard 'stop,' I flopped down onto the ground.

– Thud, thud.

Footsteps approached my head. Professor Atra looked down at me.

"Do you realize?"

"Heave… heave…"

It was an unexpected question, but I nodded. Puzzled inwardly, I then grasped a bit of the reasoning.

"The blessing of growth is granted to cadets, allowing them to grow at a rate that is otherworldly compared to before."

One of the main reasons everyone desperately wants to enter The Tower of Growth is for the blessing of growth.

It absurdly amplifies growth in all positive aspects, and even the rate of growth is

incredibly high.

“Probably, your rate of growth is set higher than other cadets.”

Special admission student. I recall from the original work that the protagonist had a higher rate of growth than other main characters.

“Thanks to that. In just one night, your body has grown noticeably enough for you to feel it. Have you understood up to here?”

– Nod

In other words, I was in a superior condition compared to others.

“Well, the immediate level of your physical condition is bottom-of-the-barrel, so that’s part of why you’re feeling it more, but still, the performance of the blessing can’t be denied.”

Professor Atra placed a water jug beside my head.

I emptied the bottle and took a brief moment to rest, lying down.

“In simple terms, even something as basic as running can explosively enhance your physical abilities. So run with all your might. Do you understand?”

– Nod

“Alright. Then get up.”

It seemed her warning that we would start for real from today was not an empty threat. Yesterday had ended with just running.

Barely managing to stand, Professor Atra handed me something long she had been carrying at her waist.

Taking it in hand, I felt a considerable weight.

It was a Western-style sword common on the internet.

“From today, we’ll also include sparring. I’ve decided you’re ready to start today,

given the rate of your growth."

As I inspected the sheathed sword, she then pulled out a wooden sword.

"Let me say in advance that I don't do systematic training."

"?"

"Swing the sword as much as you like. I won't get hurt, so don't hesitate."

Something about that statement was odd.

No systematic training? Swing it as much as I like? No need to worry about injuring her? What did all that mean?

As I was feeling a chill at her words…

– Shivers

"…!!"

My hairs bristled. Following an instant surge of thought, I swung the sword, still sheathed.

Bang! My arm jerked violently. The handle of the trembling sword was gripped tightly. I almost dropped the sword. My body, unable to absorb the shock, was pushed backward.

"Hmm?"

Professor Atra let out a puzzled hum. I steadied my stance from swinging the sword and narrowed my eyes.

"Have you ever held a sword before?"

It was a sudden question.

Confused, I tapped my smartwatch.

[Uh? No.]

"…Indeed."

Professor Atra seemed to understand something on her own and nodded after my answer.

I had a bad feeling.

Before I could ask what she understood, Professor Atra gripped the wooden sword.

"Here I come."

'Don't come.'

I couldn't say it out loud. There was no time to tap my smartwatch. Professor Atra's figure was closing in fast.

The menacing sound of rushing wind instinctively made me anticipate the future.

It was going to be incredibly tough from here on out.

CHAPTER 15
TRAINING (2)

Hong Yeon-hwa was residing in the penthouse on the top floor of the first-year dormitory building one at The Tower of Growth.

She was from the 121st intake, among 613 cadets, having secured the position of runner-up during admission.

Her practical skills scored perfect marks… it was just the written exam where she fell slightly short, allowing Baek Ahrin to take the top spot.

As one of the top-ranked students, she had the right to choose a house, but thinking it would be more convenient to meet with friends, she chose the penthouse.

It was a pretty decent facility.

Even to Hong Yeon-hwa, who was cherished by her clan and lived luxuriously, it seemed to have everything one could need.

Thanks to that, she didn't have any problems living here.

"Sigh…"

As it was the first day, there were no special lectures.

They briefly went over the course outlines and explained how they would proceed with the subjects starting tomorrow, followed by some friendly sparring.

8 PM.

After finishing her personal training and a late dinner following the lectures, Hong Yeon-hwa carelessly hung her outerwear and threw herself onto the bed.

The plush bed embraced her body. It had been a mess in the morning, but now it was neatly tidied up, likely Ariel's doing with the laundry and cleaning.

She didn't feel particularly fatigued. Her body was not at the point where a day's schedule would accumulate fatigue.

Though she was technically a cadet by status, Hong Yeon-hwa possessed enough strength to take on the role of a team leader in a clan right away.

If there was any fatigue, it was certainly on the mental side.

"…I wonder if he's okay."

She grabbed a spare pillow and hugged it tightly. She buried her face in its softness and muttered without thinking.

These past few days, Hong Yeon-hwa had only one thing on her mind.

Lee Hayul.

The first and only special admission student.

The cadet at the center of recent topics.

'He looked pale this morning too. The dark circles under his eyes seemed darker… and it looks like he's lost some cheek fat. Does he eat properly usually? He ate so little at lunch too. Was it not tasty? No, he said it was tasty… Was it just a polite remark?'

Her head felt congested. Filled with worries, they flowed through her mind, naturally centering on Lee Hayul.

"Ha…"

She sighed for what seemed like the umpteenth time today. The frustration was suffocating. Ugh… She buried her face into the pillow and thrashed about violently. Her feet meaninglessly pounded the bed in rapid succession.

"What should I do…"

Not that she didn't have an interest from the beginning – that would be a lie.

What kind of qualifications does he have, how immense his potential must be, and

what possibilities lie within him for the master of the cradle, silent for over a century, to take notice?

The superhuman factions, of course, and even normal society had their focus on him. If rumors spread that Lee Hayul stepped outside right now, all sorts of people would flock to him.

Before the welcoming party, there was a certain amount of information control, but now it has significantly weakened, and a lot of information has been released.

In other words, if Lee Hayul went outside the cradle, there would be plenty of people who would recognize him.

Hong Yeon-hwa was curious too. She wanted to meet him once to see what kind of outstanding person he was.

She had been planning to visit him once the semester started. If it had not been their first meeting, she might have approached him first at the freshman welcoming party.

The first meeting.

Not a sweet reverberation, but one full of regret…

Another sigh. Her breath, trapped by the pillow, smacked back against her face.

"Agu, guk…"

After stretching out her body, she flipped over. Staring blankly at the patterns on the ceiling, she turned on her smartwatch.

Her fingers swiped through the hologram, coming to an abrupt stop at Lee Hayul's number.

"……"

– Beep

The hologram unfolded with a slide.

▸Lee Hayul: Thanks to you, Hong Yeon-hwa, I got back in safely (Yesterday 11:12)

▸Lee Hayul: I really appreciate what you did yesterday. If it wasn't for you, I would have been in big trouble. I'll make sure to repay you when I have the chance (Yesterday 11:13)

▸Lee Hayul: You've already apologized. That's more than enough (Yesterday 11:15)

▸Lee Hayul: If anything, I'm the one who caused the trouble (Yesterday 11:16)

'He really speaks elegantly.'

The messages brought a sense of ease just by looking at them. Each word seemed to be considerate of the other person.

▸Lee Hayul: I enjoyed the lunch today. Next time, it's on me (Today 7:57)

"Ah."

There was a text that had just arrived. It was about the lunch being satisfactory. She had heard it from him directly at lunch, and this text could also be out of politeness, but it somewhat eased Hong Yeon-hwa's worries.

Her fingers glowed as they moved.

▸Me: Really? Glad to hear it was tasty…

Glad… glad… uh…

The fingers that were moving like rays of light suddenly froze. Her thoughts slowed down, and her fingers followed suit, becoming sluggish.

'What should I send?'

The tone of the text she was typing felt awkward. The usually quiet Hong Yeon-hwa glanced at the hologram.

[Group Chat(6)]

▸Shin Seoyul: [Breaking] Gop-hwa clan's Hong Yeon-hwa in hot water over character issue (2 days ago 19:11)

▸Yi Si-eun: Scandal erupts over her “Can’t you see ahead?” remark to a blind person… (2 days ago 19:13)

▸Seo Ha-eun: If you just look at this, she really seems like trash (2 days ago 19:14)

▸Shin Seoyul: Is this what you call justice? (2 days ago 19:14)

▸Me: You bitches (2 days ago 20:17)

.

▸Me: Recommend me a good place quick (Today 1:11)

▸Seo Ha-eun: Guys like spicy pork (Today 1:12)

▸Baek Ahrin: Why are you ditching us, Yeon-hwa? (Today 1:12)

▸Seo Ha-eun: Just a glimpse of a guy and we’re cast aside so quickly (Today 1:13)

▸Shin Seoyul: You ditch your friends? You ditch your friends? You ditch your friends? You ditch your friends? (Today 1:13)

▸Yi Si-eun: A man who might become a husband is indeed more important than friends of ten years… (Today 1:15)

▸Me: Don’t f*cking spazz out (Today 1:21)

.

▸Shin Seoyul: (Picture of vanilla chocolate parfait) (Today 18:33)

▸Shin Seoyul: Want to eat it? Want to eat it? (Today 18:33)

▸Seo Ha-eun: Pig (Today 18:35)

▸Shin Seoyul: ㅗ (Today 18:39)

▸Hwang Si-yeon: +0.3kg (Today 18:41)

▸Shin Seoyul: Yep~ I'm a superhuman, so I don't gain weight~ (Today 18:42)

▸Shin Seoyul: This is for the traitor who threw her friends away like old rags and ran to a guy to eat good food (Today 18:43)

▸Me: Wanna die? (Today 18:52)

▸Shin Seoyul: Gasp, death threat (Today 18:54)

▸Me: See you tomorrow (Today 18:55:12)

▸Shin Seoyul: Sorry (Today 18:55:13)

"……"

It was pure chaos. Under the eyes of others, they all seemed fine, if not good kids, but when they were amongst themselves, they turned into lunatics.

She quietly closed the group chat. The heart that had been healed by Lee Hayul felt like it was rotting away.

Rotting away.

Her mood plummeted instantly. Memories from the past played automatically in her mind.

The infirmary bathed in the sunset light. Lee Hayul, sleeping like a woodland fairy. The burn scar covering his right hand.

The mark of the Gop-hwa clan.

"Shit."

Her insides boiled. Spurred by surging impulses, she spewed out curses.

Gop-hwa.

The name of her clan and the name of the unique ability passed down through generations. A name that she took pride in.

Her clan's progenitor was a figure who emerged during the 'cataclysm' some 200 years ago.

A time when monsters swarmed the world, dungeons went berserk daily, and the world turned upside down as if it were a realm of demons.

That progenitor, named Hong Yeon, cut through that world with flames, killing countless monsters and saving people, earning a reputation akin to the tower lords who built the world's current structure. The Gop-hwa clan, inheriting that bloodline, became a superhuman group with considerable power in the world.

With enough favors and grudges to overflow.

Following the deeds and family traditions left by the progenitor, the successive clan leaders and elders have carried out actions that could be called virtuous.

The duty of the strong and the rulers, as superhumans.

They eradicated the dungeons that brought chaos, burned to death the monsters that caused disorder, punished the villains who oppressed the innocent commoners, and engaged in various activities to stabilize the world.

But the clan's history spans 200 years. To expect no miscreants within the clan over two centuries is like hoping for a dream.

There would always be those who go against the clan's philosophy, shirk their duties in search of their rights, and trample others for their pleasure.

200 years of history. It was more than Hong Yeon-hwa, barely in her twenties, could comprehend.

However, hoping there were no miscreants during that time was an overly optimistic wish. She remembered the misdeeds committed by members of her generation.

– Crunch!

A sinister sound resonated as she bit down hard. The taste of bitter blood in her mouth snapped her back to reality.

"……"

Nothing had been confirmed yet.

When was Lee Hayul exposed to Gop-hwa? She had her suspicions, but nothing was certain.

Which despicable bastard did this? She didn't know yet. What was the purpose? Was it intentional? She knew nothing.

What was certain was…

She had caused Lee Hayul a lot of trouble, and the burn on his right arm was a result of her clan's doing.

She was an inheritor of Gop-hwa. She knew very well what kind of power Gop-hwa held, what harm a touch of Gop-hwa could cause, and even if one survived Gop-hwa, what kind of aftermath it would bring.

Was Lee Hayul's frail body related to Gop-hwa? The thought alone made blood rush to her head.

She realized that whenever she involved Lee Hayul, blood rushed to her head. Despite it being a connection of barely a week, she spent excessive attention and dense emotions on it.

But what could she do?

She was never one to think deeply; she always just followed her feelings.

She had a sense of guilt. She had caused trouble multiple times during their first meeting, and there was the mark of Gop-hwa.

Appearance… With fairy-like beauty that would make everyone turn their heads on the streets. Wasn't it an appearance that could foster affection?

Efforts to consider others shone through his actions. He was the one who comforted her, saying it was all right despite the inconvenience she had caused.

Desire to get closer was enough as a reason.

Hong Yeon-hwa, having calmed her emotions, closed her eyes.

The unique ability known as Gop-hwa always stirred the emotions of its possessor.

As emotions intensified, Gop-hwa would flare up as well, but it carried the risk of clouding one's reason and narrowing the spectrum of personality.

That was the reason for Hong Yeon-hwa's impulsive and irritable nature.

Especially since her output of Gop-hwa was abnormally high, prompting intense emotional provocation.

Because of this, about half of the training she received from the clan had to do with emotional control.

Ignoring the nagging that Ariel, who came in late, was babbling, Hong Yeon-hwa fell into a deep sleep.

'This is enough.'

Whatever reasons she gave, Hong Yeon-hwa felt a sense of guilt and wanted to wash it away. She felt an attraction and wanted to get closer.

This was enough.

.

.

.

The next day.

[Good morning.]

"……"

Arriving earlier than usual, Hong Yeon-hwa faced Lee Hayul, who was covered in a fresh array of bruises.

"…Crunch."

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes blazed like the fires of hell.

CHAPTER 16
TRAINING (3)

At first, I thought I had heard wrong.

Here I was, handed a steel sword, while Professor Atra charged at me wielding a wooden one.

A wooden sword rushing towards a steel one. That's madness in any usual context.

And me? I'm nominally blind, am I not? I'm supposed to have perception abilities, but still, I'm someone with their eyes closed?

Under normal circumstances, this would be considered the act of a lunatic, but considering the difference between Professor Atra and me, I couldn't help but think there must be some intent behind it.

She's a professor in charge of combat training. It's just speculation, but she must be at least as skilled as a high-ranking hero.

So, I drew the sword without hesitation.

I gripped it tightly while facing the charging Professor Atra.

I swung the sword with all my might, intending to resist. I presumed she would block and dodge effortlessly as I attacked.

My assumption was correct. My sword couldn't even graze her.

With her mysterious movements, she evaded everything by a hair's breadth. When I thrust towards her, she tilted her head to dodge; when I swept in an arc, she avoided it without taking a single step.

It was as if she could see the future, and after dodging my attempts a few times, Professor Atra lifted her wooden sword with an indifferent face.

– Tap! Tap! Tap!

“Here, here, here.”

Attacks after dodging. She would effortlessly evade the sword, approach, and then rhythmically drum her wooden sword all over my body.

Head, shoulders, arms, ribs, thighs, calves… she thoroughly distributed the strikes across my body.

I forcefully suppressed the screams about to erupt. Once I started screaming, it might trigger a chain of curses.

It wasn’t excruciatingly painful, but it hurt enough to make me want to groan. Holding back the screams was a torment.

This was what they called Spartan training, wasn’t it?

My swings were dodged effortlessly, and at the same time, she advised me on how to swing, closing the distance effortlessly and pounding on what she considered to be vulnerabilities.

It was a relentless beating. The intensity of it made me wonder if her earlier claims of indifference to special admission students were a lie.

In fact, I had looked at her expression, suspecting she might dislike me, but it was a stoic face devoid of emotion.

– Tap! Tap! Thwack!

The onslaught continued.

* * *

Eventually, after hours of getting savagely beaten by the wooden sword, the lecture came to an end.

“That’s enough for today.”

Professor Atra approached me, sprawled chaotically on the dirt floor.

A bottle of water was placed beside me as if it were compensation. My arms trembled as I reached for the much-needed hydration.

By now, evening had settled in and the ground was stained with a light orange hue from the sunset.

“We will continue with this format for several weeks.”

My God.

I almost choked on the water that was trickling down my throat.

The realization that I was going to be beaten like this for several weeks made the corners of my eyes twitch.

I felt like crying at the thought of getting hammered like this again tomorrow.

My whole body was sore. Yesterday, the pain had been from overexertion, but now it was from the physical beating.

“And try not to receive any healing or recovery from other superhumans if possible.”

Ah… I disliked the reason as soon as I guessed it.

“Healing abilities might instantly erase the wounds, but it would nullify most of today’s training and hinder the growth of your own natural healing capabilities. So, let the healing occur naturally as much as possible.”

Physical growth usually happened as muscles tore and healed during the process.

Ravaged muscles resolve not to tear again and grow in response to harsh exercise.

Healing abilities come in various forms, but most are remembered for ‘instant healing’ or ‘recovery amplification’.

If instant healing is applied to torn muscles, they recover before they have a chance to grow.

Recovery amplification is similar. Although it’s less immediate than instant healing, it prevents growth because it relies on external aid.

In other words, I have to return home battered and bruised.

“For your reference, this schedule was planned under the assumption that your perception abilities could replace normal sight. And as I expected, your perceptual abilities are sufficient to replace vision, so I will continue the lectures as today.”

Professor Atra added an explanation as if she thought I was confused.

“Arrive at the site by my class time tomorrow.”

Having said that, Professor Atra turned her back and walked away.

Lying on my back, I started to feel the wind blowing. Breathing out absentmindedly, I realized something was off.

Even though my back was on the ground and I faced the sky, I could not see it. It was frustrating.

I became aware once again of the importance of spatial perception.

I felt so apologetic for having once despised spatial perception. What if it had been unable to replace my vision? I… I wouldn’t be confident of surviving.

It might be a vexing ability that’s been a pain from the start, but now it had become an indispensable one.

“Phew.”

I sighed heavily, reflecting on the recent sparring. Even that was thanks to the filial-like spatial perception.

In my life, there have been few occasions when I’ve wielded a blade. I’ve hardly ever held a sword outside of cooking while living on my own.

And even more so with combat. I’ve been beaten up quite a bit, but I’ve rarely ever struck anyone.

The recent sparring with Professor Atra. All my sword swings were imitations of movements I observed in the friendly sparring matches.

The sparring between Katsuki Yusei and Hong Yeon-hwa. Both used wooden swords, and their magical power did not exceed the level of physical enhancement. Also, they did not use their unique abilities.

The rules were almost identical to those of my recent session.

I compared my movements to those of Katsuki Yusei and Hong Yeon-hwa.

"Hmm…"

The internal evaluation was a mess. Something that couldn't be compared…

When I focused and compared them side by side, the inadequacy was to the point of ridiculousness.

Katsuki Yusei's movements were smooth and fluid like a flowing river.

Despite being pushed back by Hong Yeon-hwa at every turn, his swordplay never broke, continually thwarting her attacks.

Hong Yeon-hwa had an exuberant and bold style, much like her personality.

Every move was filled with power, making it a burden to defend against. And the movements weren't sluggish, making them difficult to avoid.

The large and showy actions appeared to have many openings, but they were all traps, and anyone who rushed in heedlessly would likely lose their head.

As a result, Katsuki Yusei, who employed a defensive sword technique, was eventually swept into Hong Yeon-hwa's rhythm and ultimately defeated.

Even though their proficiency with the sword was comparable, there was a mismatch, or perhaps a spec difference that was too great.

For instance, Hong Yeon-hwa had single-handedly vanquished a level-five monster. Although Gop-hwa played a major role, dodging the monster's attacks and landing successful blows was thanks to her own skill.

As for me…

The swordplay was disjointed. Far from being a river, my movements were like drops of water trickling from a half-closed tap.

There were gaps between my attempted flows of melee, and Professor Atra glided in easily to strike. Even if I pretended to connect my sword strikes, given the difference in our levels, she would have come at me either way.

My flow was broken by Professor Atra on her own accord.

Every time I tried to assume a stance, she pressed in. She would thrust forward before I could even lift my sword, leaving me fumbling in between. If I managed an attack, she evaded, and before I could recover she launched another assault.

I lacked the powerful attacks characteristic of Hong Yeon-hwa. Not only was my spec at rock bottom, but I also lacked the ability to intuitively spot an opening and strike down like she did.

To summarize, my score was zero.

As for Professor Atra?

I brushed aside the image I had conjured up until now, and summoned the image of her from the sparring, as observed through spatial perception.

…Professor Atra had no distinctive features.

She took a firm stance. She would enter carefully and block the flow before my attack. She would cut off the flow before it could continue and follow up with strikes.

If an attack came at her, she evaded by the slimmest margin. It was not an unpredictable move but a natural dodge, something anyone would think of.

And then she would go on the offensive.

Her movements were textbook. Most of them were actions I had seen in swordsmanship books I had previously skimmed through. Overall, they were unadorned and simple.

In essence, I should be able to follow suit.

I kept recalling them. There was an abundance of material. For hours on end of being beaten, Professor Atra's movements continued to be observed and memorized.

The movements of Katsuki Yusei. The movements of Hong Yeon-hwa. The movements of Professor Atra… and my movements.

I compared, analyzed, and juxtaposed them.

The way to step on the ground, the division of breath, the method of managing distance, the way to grip the sword, when to correct the posture, the center of gravity in the lower body, the twisting of the shoulders, the direction of the pupils, the processing of the gaze, the transition from defense to offense.

I processed the data. Turned it into information.

I applied the information to myself. Made corrections, tore down, and rebuilt. Ran brain simulations, and if they didn't feel right, tore them down again.

Although the end result was still defeat, the imagined version of myself seemed to be making progress in the process.

I repeated the mental simulation. I kept repeating it, basing it on the data obtained from spatial perception.

As night fell and the earth faded out of sight, the twilight also disappeared. In its stead, the stars strewn across the night sky cast their light upon the ground.

At a certain moment, a tickling sensation arose in a corner of my brain. It was frustrating not being able to scratch it directly, but it was a curious stimulation that brought a sense of anticipation.

Before coming to the dormitory, I had struggled with spatial perception in my one-room apartment and felt the signs of change that were now recognizable.

But this time, it wasn't spatial perception.

'Jack of All Trades.'

A unique ability of the versatile category that provides at least a minimum level of aptitude in every skill set—combat techniques, body techniques, martial arts,

swordsmanship, spearmanship, manufacturing, cooking, mana manipulation, and so forth.

I grasped the signs of change. I had a sense of how to develop it.

A proud smile blossomed.

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.

.

'Ah, review.'

After lying there dazed for a while, I finally remembered.

I scrambled to my feet and headed back to the dormitory. The 24-hour bus service made my return quick and easy.

So ended the day.

"Who is it?"

[M? Me?]

"What the fuck… who did this?"

The next day.

The face of Hong Yeon-hwa that I encountered in the classroom was contorted like a fierce demon.

She was so scary that I wanted to run away right then and there.

CHAPTER 17
TRAINING (4)

I'd been thoroughly thrashed by Professor Atra, and now I was marked with bruises. They were evenly distributed all over my body, leaving no place untouched.

It was okay when I was on my way back to the dormitory since there weren't many people around. However, thinking about attending classes with a bruised face tomorrow, I knew I'd draw unnecessary attention.

Applying ice packs managed to reduce them a little, but it didn't make much of a difference; my appearance was still eye-catching.

While clothes could cover the bruises on my body, the problem was, inevitably, my face.

'Even getting beaten requires skill… '

It might seem like the blows were haphazard, but a closer examination of my body showed that there weren't any particularly damaged spots.

Although bruises had formed, pressing them with an ice pack and seeing them go down proved they weren't serious injuries.

By the next day, the bruises had faded even more. At this rate, it seemed like they would disappear entirely soon.

Still, my face remained a bruised mess, so I contemplated what to do about it. I even thought about going in a hijab or something, but I decided just to leave as is.

It felt like I was making a fuss over nothing, and regardless of whether I covered up or not, I'd attract attention.

The embarrassment of showing my beaten face… I decided to endure it. It's not like these are shameful scars; they are the result of training with a professor, after all.

All the way to school, I was the focus of many eyes, and I arrived at the classroom slightly late.

“Hey Hayul! Good morning… oh my goodness!”

Liana, who had arrived earlier, turned her head with a welcoming smile. She started waving at me but froze as her gaze landed on my face.

Her eyes widened as if she’d seen something she shouldn’t have, and covering her mouth with both hands, she abruptly stood up.

“Hayul! Hayul! What happened to you!”

She kicked her chair away and hurried over to me, looking horrified.

Her over-the-top reaction drew even more attention.

“What happened to you? You’re covered in bruises!”

She peered closely with a face full of worry, shocked to see bruises not just on my face but elsewhere too.

[It happened during the major class.]

“Wha… What kind of lecture could possibly…?”

Liana’s lips quivered; then she brought her hands together, mustering her mana. I could feel the steady flow of mana materializing from within her and reached out, gripping Liana’s wrist firmly.

“Hayul?”

Confused by my action, Liana looked even more perplexed when I shook my head. Stepping back a few paces, I tapped my smartwatch.

[You can’t heal me.]

“??”

Questions clouded Liana’s face, multiplying rather than dissipating.

“Healing is not allowed…? Why?”

[It’s for recovery training.]

“??”

Liana furrowed her brows and tilted her head, the confusion evident. The others, who had followed her with exclamations of their own, were similarly puzzled, question marks practically floating above their heads.

“Recovery training? Is that a thing?”

“I don’t know; my major class is different.”

“No, but are many people undergoing that kind of training?”

“…I’ve never seen it, at least.”

Liana’s expression got even stranger, perhaps picking up on the whispers around her.

‘Was it not a commonly used training method?’

After suffering a crushing defeat in my first life, I had adopted this method starting from my second life as a standard way of leveling up.

It was a system where intentionally keeping one’s life force (HP) low would gradually increase one’s stamina, durability stats, and life force recovery rate.

In the early days when every second was valuable, it was a training method I often used.

However, if too much life force was drained, it could result in permanent loss, and if not enough was drained, the method would be ineffective. So, it was crucial to find the right balance.

Even I was skeptical at first, but after hearing something similar from Professor Atra, I decided to practice it.

It was then that Hong Yeon-hwa entered my spatial perception.

I sensed Hong Yeon-hwa crossing the corridor and heading to the classroom within the slightly narrowed range of my perception.

– Slide

Shortly after, the back door opened, and in walked Hong Yeon-hwa, wearing the same red jumper as yesterday, trudging into the classroom.

She glanced around the room and then her gaze turned towards me. Approaching with a light smile, Hong Yeon-hwa greeted me.

“Hey Hayul. Have a good—ah… Ch—”

Her words stumbled and scattered into the void. A cold breeze seemed to blow from somewhere.

“……”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s friends, who had been chatting and following her in, wore startled expressions due to the sudden shift in the atmosphere. They looked back and forth between me and Hong Yeon-hwa and their faces paled.

The once buzzing classroom fell silent. It became an area so quiet, you couldn’t even hear an ant walking.

The cause was right in front of me.

A seriously ominous energy was flowing around Hong Yeon-hwa. Everyone knew – they felt the immediate presence of a ticking time bomb, and thus, everyone held their breath.

I, directly in front of Hong Yeon-hwa, held my breath even more.

Her expression was chillingly stiff. Intermittent, ominous friction sounds leaked between clenched teeth and fists. Contrary to her expression, her eyes burned red like the flames of hell.

If I had my eyes open, I wouldn’t have dared to meet her gaze. To lock eyes with Hong Yeon-hwa in such a state would require an immense amount of courage.

Her lips, firm like a castle's gates, finally parted. The voice that seeped through quivered with barely contained rage.

"Who did this?"

[M? Me?]

"What the fuck… Who did this to you?"

For some reason, Hong Yeon-hwa had refrained from using coarse language in front of me before.

But now, whether due to a lack of self-control or simply not caring, vulgar words spilled from her mouth.

"…ugh."

I knew that Hong Yeon-hwa treated me with a certain gentleness. Though I didn't understand exactly why, I sensed that in some way she was concerned about me.

So when I decided to go out despite being all beaten up, I did think about what her reaction might be, but I wasn't particularly worried.

I never expected it to be this intense.

I sensed her facial expression through spatial perception. The friction between the clenched teeth, the tension in her fists.

And thanks to my love for mana affinity, I could even feel the ball of fire-like mana within Hong Yeon-hwa.

Her mana, influenced by the unique ability Gop-hwa and bearing the properties of flames, has always been distinctively identifiable.

Though there were others with flame-like mana, the difference with Hong Yeon-hwa was stark.

If others were torches, Hong Yeon-hwa was a wild flame that could consume even those holding the torches.

No chance for a misconception; the difference was too clear.

Hong Yeon-hwa's Gop-hwa was special. Even among those with the unique ability Gop-hwa, and among its past possessors, her output was exceptional.

And now, especially, the usually rough raging fire seemed on the verge of a storm, burning with a madness like never before.

"Who did this to you…!"

The flame raged. In her eyes, a Gop-hwa that could engulf everything flickered. Emotions fed the flames, causing them to blaze even more fiercely.

"Ah, oh…!"

Her face turned ghostly white. Flames that seemed ready to lash out at any moment danced before my eyes.

My right arm began to throb.

–…!

A memory from childhood surged unexpectedly. It was a memory filled with complex emotions.

–… Ah!

Flames had flickered that day too. It was a day when the sky filled with black ash blurred my already hazy vision. My throat, which was already constricted, felt even tighter.

– Ahhh—!

It was the day my parents, who never truly acted like parents, were burned to death.

The day when the smell of charred flesh filled my nose and gave me a perverse sense of satisfaction.

The day I felt they had deserved such divine punishment.

They might have engulfed my arm as well, but at least you are gone and somehow that made me happy.

– Shit! Why did a fire start all of a sudden…!

– Ahhh! Please, save me—!

…It was the day the parents I once longed for love from burned to death.

That day.

The flames I had flailed against while sprawled on the stone floor, trying to shake off the fire that clung to my arm, and the fire before me now, seemed to overlap.

Why did they overlap? Was it because they were both relating to fire that the memory came back to me?

It was a moment when I sensed something incongruent.

The fervently burning Gop-hwa hesitated and then shrank from its formerly inflating size. The maliciously lashing flames slowly began to subside.

'Huh.'

I was late to realize it since I had been recalling the past. From a certain point on, the perspective of spatial perception had changed.

Before this transformation, my spatial perception was like a radar. A perspective where only the Gop-hwa blazing before me was felt.

Nearby, a variety of smaller and larger mana signatures were conglomerating, and I could also sense the aura of water and ice, probably belonging to Baek Ahrin.

My spatial perception quivered, slowly changing perspective.

The viciously burning Gop-hwa ebbed, and in its stead, a flustered Hong Yeon-hwa took its place.

"Ah, oh…! Sorry! I'm sorry…!"

Hong Yeon-hwa was flailing her arms in panic. Her eyes, pooling with uncertainty, anxiety, and guilt, were dripping with cold sweat.

"I'm sorry for getting angered…! It was not at you…! It's just, I got too excited…!"

While I was baffled by the drastic change from a moment ago, I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

Trying to catch my breath, I nodded. My chest pounded. I clasped my hands over my heart and pressed down. Honestly, I felt like I was about to faint while still standing.

Facing Gop-hwa's potential rampage head-on was bad enough, but the combination of spatial perception and mana affinity made me feel it more vividly than anyone else could.

[I'm okay.]

After some time, my heart finally calmed down.

Despite repeatedly conveying that I was okay, reassuring Hong Yeon-hwa proved to be more time-consuming.

I was the one who was scared, yet somehow Hong Yeon-hwa looked more anxious.

"…Recovery training? Are they still using such an antiquated method?"

There was still some time before the class started, so I had the leisure to explain the situation.

After settling down, I calmly explained to Hong Yeon-hwa—who was metaphorically digging a hole for herself and calling herself trash—all about it.

[Antiquated method?]

"Yes. I mean, it's not that I've never used the method, but…"

She scrunched up her face in disgust.

"The efficiency is completely dog crap? No, no, I misspoke! The efficiency is just very poor? That's why it's a training method that's been thrown out nowadays."

[Yes]

Hong Yeon-hwa, who was grinding out her dissatisfaction as though smothering her emotions, jumped at her own use of ‘dog crap’ and, checking my reaction, hastily corrected her language.

I wondered why she had to change ‘dog crap’ to ‘very poor’.

It would have been fine for her to speak freely. In fact, it seemed very uncomfortable for her to filter her language like that.

However, despite my encouragement for her to speak comfortably, for some reason or another, Hong Yeon-hwa insisted on using a ridiculously polite tone, despite evidently considering her earlier words a mistake.

“Enhancing recovery? It’s not nonexistent. But the question is whether it’s a significant number… that’s also not the case. Instead, out there, if your body gets harmed, it gets harmed; there’s hardly a positive effect.”

[Aha]

So, it’s an early-stage method with poor efficiency.

And the body takes damage… It’s not unlike the original work, where you could suffer a permanent decline in life force. It certainly wasn’t particularly effective later on.

“Yeah. It’s not that there are no effects here. If you receive the growth correction, there’s undoubtedly an effect. But if you ask me if it’s worth doing, I wouldn’t do it.”

Having finished her explanation, Hong Yeon-hwa let out a deep sigh.

“Sigh… I’m really sorry about before. I lost control of my emotions again… But are you really okay? It’s not too painful…?”

[I can bear it. It’s not that terribly painful.]

My tears could dry up from the pain. I want to run away. I also wonder if it’s really necessary to do it this way.

But the professor knows better than an amateur like me… She must know how to teach better…

"…So? What's the professor's name?"

As I started packing up my belongings and preparing for class, Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been resting her chin on her hand and watching from the other side, asked.

[It's Professor Atra Clyde.]

"Atra, Atra… Okay. Thanks for telling me."

After responding reflexively, Hong Yeon-hwa nodded without looking at me.

…She might be facing away, but in my spatial perception, her expression was entirely visible. A seemingly indifferent Hong Yeon-hwa was mumbling something.

An inexplicable chill ran through me.

One must not ignore their instincts.

I remembered the intuition that shrieked desperately not to press 'character creation' just before coming to this world.

From the ominous muttering of Hong Yeon-hwa, I sensed an unsettling intuition.

Thus, every break time, I fervently insisted that Professor Atra had done nothing wrong.

She has been teaching me her best these past two days and has been instructing me well in handling arms.

This recovery training was also something I was undergoing with my consent, I repeatedly emphasized.

"Oh, I got it. I was just curious and wanted to know her name…"

As I consistently made my case to those around me, Hong Yeon-hwa's frosty demeanor gradually subsided.

When I kept pushing her buttons, she blushed and gestured with her hands, prompting me to swiftly put some distance between us.

The yelling intuition quieted down.

I wasn't sure why I had felt it, but had I left things as they were, something terrible might have occurred.

I exhaled a quiet sigh of relief.

CHAPTER 18
TRAINING (5)

Atra declared when starting the training that there were no preferences in special admissions.

There was no systematic method; the training would proceed with a form of combat that was close to actual combat. She added that it would be challenging enough to draw tears, so I should grit my teeth and follow along.

Yet, there was a bit of a lie mixed in that statement.

“There are no preferences in special admissions.” That’s a lie. Honestly, there is a slight dislike there.

Teaching someone.

And not just some regular lecture, but personally tutoring someone one-on-one brings up extremely unpleasant memories for Atra.

Memories she would rather not recall. However, sometimes they inevitably resurface against her will.

If someone else had made such a suggestion, she would’ve cursed them out and sent them packing. If they dared open their mouth again, she would’ve punched them without hesitation.

But the proposer was none other than the master of The Cradle. A benefactor who had provided several conveniences to Atra, and someone who was aware of her circumstances.

Even so, she had begrudgingly agreed, thinking there must be some significant reason behind such an offer.

But the doubt remained. Was this person someone worth being personally brought by the dean? Was he really worth that much? The question lingered in her mind.

Personal feelings were also mixed in, tilting the perception of this one-on-one education towards dislike.

“There’s no systematic teaching.” That’s true. But as far as Atra was concerned, she was being systematic in her own way.

Even if it’s an utterly thankless task, there’s a minimum standard to maintain in order to save face.

On the first day, running was used to assess basic physical ability and resolve. While it wasn’t the only way to measure ability, one couldn’t expect anything extraordinary from a freshly awakened superhuman.

‘Barely passing.’

The physical abilities were failing among failures. Even considering he’s newly superhuman, he’s weak. Barely scraping by even at the lowest rank.

Willpower… he has quite a bit of that. There’s some bite to him too. But is it really exceptionally outstanding? No, it’s not.

His unique ability is perception-based.

Basic functionality allows him to live a normal life despite being blind. While precise measurement has yet to be conducted, based on Lee Hayul’s responses, it could be speculated that among perception abilities, it’s quite unique and ranks highly.

On the second day, more running was scheduled to see the degree of improvement through The Tower of Growth’s blessing.

Usually, expecting noticeable results overnight would be insane. It’s very rare for anyone to grow significantly in just one day, freshly superhuman or not.

But with The Tower of Growth’s blessing, it’s not impossible. After all, The Cradle is a place where extraordinary growth is attainable. It’s no wonder young superhumans desperately wish to be admitted there.

‘Decent enough.’

His growth rate is higher compared to other students. But given that he’s a special

admission, it's expected; he should be above others in terms of the rate provided for special admissions.

Next, Atra handed Lee Hayul a sword for a simple test.

'Hmm.'

Despite maintaining a skeptical outlook, Atra never fabricated non-existent facts nor denied reality.

This part showed some innate talent.

When first handed a sword and subjected to a surprise attack, Lee Hayul impressively anticipated and responded well.

Then, without additional guidance, noticeable growth became evident with each moment.

The trajectory of the sword became sharper, and the stance in which it was held steadily improved.

Initially, there were many awkward aspects, as if he were copying someone else's moves, but with time, it seemed to become integrated into his own technique.

Still, it remained mediocre. There was talent. If well-cultivated, he could possibly match those with combat-oriented unique abilities, or maybe he even possesses a technical-oriented unique ability aside from his perceptual one.

And so?

There are myriads of combat-oriented unique abilities. The Cradle is filled with innumerable individuals who, endowed with talent, have sweated blood to achieve proficiency.

Of course, having said that his talent isn't mediocre.

But with the label 'special admission' attached to him… It just makes one question, why bother?

Had it been a regular admission, Atra would have considered him to be quite useful.

As a recommendation admission, she would have thought quite highly of him…

But the tag of ‘special admission’ was just too prominent.

A frail body, adequate mental strength, high-level perception ability, and fairly rapid growth in swordsmanship.

All these attributes are ill-fitting for the unprecedented nature of a ‘special admission.’

Among the golden generations of the past, the prospects that shone brilliantly, and the potential Lee Hayul is now demonstrating have great differences.

It’s only been two days, of course. There could be other areas where he has special talents that are not sword-related. It’s still too soon for a definitive judgment.

Hence, on the following day, Atra gave him a spear.

Lee Hayul received the spear with a dubious expression. Holding the spear shaft, he seemed to be asking if this was correct.

It’s understandable. Even though it’s only been a day, he had adapted to the sword; now he’s being told to switch weapons immediately.

Just as the saying goes, ‘Dig one well deeply,’ when time and talent are limited, it is more efficient to focus on one thing.

But Atra’s thoughts were slightly different. It’s true what they say that focusing on one thing is efficient.

However, shouldn’t you also know how other wells are dug and what results they yield?

It doesn’t make sense to be clueless about spears just because you’re trained with swords.

Even if you don’t wield a spear, you still need to know how to handle one.

Atra, responsible for Lee Hayul’s combat major lectures, at least thought so.

The reason she purposely had Lee Hayul handle different weapons was to search for his talent while experiencing various arms firsthand, and to encourage an understanding of how to counteract them.

At the very least, Atra believed so while training, and with the backing of her own talent, her exhaustive efforts eventually made her a top hero in the 'duel' category.

"Alright, here I come."

Atra announced a short warning, and observing Lee Hayul firmly gripping the spear shaft as if he had prepared himself, she thrust the spear.

– Clang!

The spear was swiftly dodged.

'Hmm?'

A slight sense of discomfort crossed Atra's mind. She withdrew the wavering spear with a slight shake and thrust again.

Three thrusts were aimed in succession, at the forehead, throat, and heart.

Lee Hayul, who had just been holding a sword yesterday, had impressively blocked the initial attack. He did considerably well in repelling an attack Atra thought to be permissible.

However, his subsequent response was clumsy. There were gaps between movements, making it easy to disrupt his defense. Atra could even have interrupted his moves before they unfolded fully.

That was Lee Hayul yesterday.

– Swipe! Clang! Clank!

He retaliates. The spear blocks all three thrusts. Atra's eyes widened.

The combinations were impressively smooth. At least significantly better than yesterday. She retrieved the spear to verify her observation.

Following that, she slashed.

Although a spear is specialized for stabbing, its unique length allows for powerful slashing and swinging as well.

– Whoosh!

The attack split the air. Lee Hayul, choosing not to engage directly, stepped back a few paces to evade and regripped the spear shaft, stomping the ground.

'Hmm.'

From a missed slash, she transitioned to a stab. The attack pattern shifted in an instant. The spearhead cut through the wind with an upright thrust.

Thump! The air-parting spear clashed against another spear. Atra didn't back down but maneuvered her spear once again; this time, Lee Hayul responded without retreating.

The spears clashed. Thrust against thrust, block against slash, spear shafts collided, creating a struggle of power.

'This kid… '

What's he up to?

During the cross of spears, Atra's eyes reflected a glint of puzzlement.

Lee Hayul yesterday. He wielded the sword well. Although she deemed it immature, for a first-time use, it was indeed handled well.

Lee Hayul now. He wielded the spear well. Immature? By Atra's standards, still yes. Nevertheless, there was a clear improvement over yesterday.

Yesterday, it was sword training. But today, he was using a spear. Despite that, he had improved.

And.

– Thump! Crack! Clang!

He is still growing. The pace is quite steep. Even compared to yesterday, it's faster.

To verify further, she upped the level. His physical abilities remained the same, but she increased the sophistication of her techniques.

Lee Hayul frowned, apparently struggling with the frontal engagement. Instead of going head-on, he flowed with the momentum, changing his stance to a deflecting one.

His legs moved as if flowing above the ground. The awkwardness of his legs, which had been pointed out, was improved. It allowed his upper body, now with some spare energy, to block attacks and occasionally counter.

He seemed to be focusing more on defense and counterattacks rather than straight offense. Atra played along, not using different tricks, just pounding on the frontal defense.

The spear that blocked the wooden one rocked perilously. Consequently, the defense formed by the spear undulated as if it could collapse.

Yet, he held the final line. He still didn't allow hits as he did yesterday.

And above all, his physical condition wasn't like yesterday's… no, that's not it.

It was a strange case.

Atra narrowed her eyes. She hasn't made a concrete judgment yet. She lacked the foundation to draw a conclusion. To do so, she needed to push Lee Hayul even further.

For her to establish the direction going forward…

"Get ready, teacher! The moment I catch up, I'll pay back everything I've endured up to now!"

'……'

An unpleasant memory surfaced again.

She intensified the offense.

After about a hundred exchanges, the defense was pierced.

* * *

The spear hurtled toward me wildly. I did my best to respond with spatial perception, but before I could even fully address it, again and again, the attacks flew at me.

'Gaaaah…!'

Yesterday, it was a sword, and now today, it's a spear. No, I had been running simulations with the sword all evening and up to this morning – and now she tells me to use a spear.

It was absurd, but I held the spear anyway. There must be a reason behind the word of someone so skilled.

Fortunately, perhaps because the category of combat was the same, I managed to handle the spear quite well. The simulations I ran, even at the expense of sleep, weren't in vain; initially, I was able to respond to every strike without being hit.

I pondered much over the spatial perception in the duel from yesterday and the incident this morning.

I had seen Gop-hwa burning fiercely. It's not my first time seeing Gop-hwa, but it had never quivered like it did today, and I had never observed it so vividly.

Spatial perception.

On the first day, I almost died due to the overload of massive information, and thereafter, the cost-reduced radar spatial perception was lacking in information.

The current spatial perception, with light and shadow… I mean, being able to recognize colors, performs as well as a normal person's vision.

But that's when I thought about it.

Radar spatial perception suffered from lack of details. Without recognizing colors, everyday life was inconvenient. But did it not catch motion? No, it did. Quite well.

I asked myself. During combat, are colors really that important? That would depend on the fight.

But for the sword duel yesterday, it was unnecessary.

There's a limit to the information spatial perception can process. More accurately, there's a limit to how much I can handle.

On the first day, my brain couldn't handle the amount of information, leading to an overload.

Radar spatial perception and color spatial perception.

In a duel where simple movements are identified, which spatial perception would be more efficient?

– Crash…! Clang! Clink!

The answer was the radar. At least, Atra's movements felt more perceptible to me than yesterday.

A world of black and green. A view that's almost maddeningly unpleasant, but when it comes to fighting, this side is more suitable than the world of colors.

My skill at managing spatial perception has also significantly improved, allowing me to discern facial features, even with radar spatial perception.

If in the past the palm of a hand felt smooth, now I can sense the lines on it.

Thanks to that, I am feeling and responding to much more than I did yesterday.

The simulations I ran until late into last night played a big part as well.

Frankly, the reason I relentlessly ran those simulations was largely due to the pain.

I thought that if I could keep getting beaten like this on rainy days, I might actually die.

I'd heard somewhere that growth must be accompanied by pain.

But there's also this saying,

It's better to grow without pain than with it.

It's a simple story. I didn't want to get beaten up with a stick.

I was accustomed to being hit from a young age, but familiarity doesn't mean I wanted to continue experiencing it.

With that in mind, I've been trying…!

– Clash! Snap! Clink! Snap!

"Here, here."

"Guh! Gurk!"

The defense breached, the spear shaft lashed against my shoulder and thigh. A jolt of pain shot up my spine as I bit down hard to endure.

'I'm still getting hit the same…!'

Despite having grown since yesterday…!

At first, I blocked well, but out of nowhere, Professor Atra suddenly raised the level, tearing through my defense and pummeling me mercilessly.

– Snap!

"The recklessness of your counter leaves you open to attacks. Consequently, the offense that's pounding on your defense becomes more and more fierce."

– Clash! Thud!

"Move your legs well. Though your arms swing the spear, your body ultimately moves through your legs."

– Thud!

"Don't think of actions in isolation; link them together. Each move influences the

subsequent ones."

While it felt like an inexorable beating, there was substantial advice that followed right behind it.

If she was just mercilessly hitting me without teaching anything, I might've tried to rebel a little, but given the effort put into educating me, it felt somewhat wrong to resist.

A few hours later.

Yet again, it was I sprawled on the ground.

Fumbling with the battered spear, Professor Atra approached me as if contemplating something.

"You've definitely grown more than yesterday. It's an unexpected amount of growth."

Not that it helped me escape the beating. Despite nearly eliminating sleep and sacrificing the hard-earned semblance of normal vision, it still wasn't enough.

After exchanging a few words, Professor Atra turned her back and left the training ground. My mind was too hazy to recall exactly what she had said.

"……?"

Something felt off.

After mulling over it, I let out a low sigh.

'W-water…?'

Usually, she'd at least give me water after it was over,

So why didn't she offer any today…?

I'm so thirsty…

CHAPTER 19
MANA (1)

-Good~ morn~ ing~! Babababa—

— Clack.

Instinctively, I lashed out at the source of the noise. The alert from my smartwatch ceased as it took the hit.

I grimaced as consciousness rose unbidden.

“Ugh…”

I wriggled my body.

The pillow in my embrace and the blanket wound snugly around me were warm and soft, whispering seductively to my freshly awakened mind to fall back into slumber.

With effort, I raised my arm and activated my smartwatch.

[Saturday AM 5:30]

Yesterday was Friday, the day I switched from practicing with a sword to a spear at The Cradle, where normally one wouldn’t broach the weekend.

It would’ve been prime sleeping time in the old days, and if I happened to wake up early, it was a time to savor the grogginess and drift in bed.

“Ergh…”

But now, that’s not permissible. Clinging to that single-minded determination, I resisted the urge to fall back asleep. I pushed myself up with some difficulty and stretched my arms out long.

I somewhat managed to chase away the drowsiness and got out of bed.

Gathering a towel and clothes, I entered the bathroom and cautiously turned on the faucet.

I doused my face with cold water, and as the chill penetrated my skin, the lingering drowsiness scurried away in shock.

"…?"

While scrubbing my face with the hanging towel, I suddenly thought better of it. There should've been bruises, and this would only bring pain.

But there was no pain. Come to think of it, that's strange.

I cocked my head and inspected my face properly with spatial perception. It was clean. Not a mark.

'Huh.'

After a silent pause, I pinched my face hard. It hurt, but it was the normal kind of pain.

The bruises had disappeared overnight. Lifting my pajamas, I checked my body too. It was pristinely clean, as if mocking the idea that there had ever been bruises.

"?"

What's this?

They were definitely there just before I went to sleep last night.

But now, they're completely gone.

I mulled over this to figure out the reason, but… still, I have no clue.

Recovery training… that's what it's called, though Hong Yeon-hwa criticized it as an antiquated chew-it-up-and-spit-it-out method.

Even Atra had said to avoid external healing if possible, but to do whatever I must if I really couldn't bear it.

Hence, I didn't receive any healing. Being hit was something I had grown used to from long ago.

The pain was inevitable, but I was told I'd grow stronger faster if I bore it, so I'm enduring.

Atra's teachings were undoubtedly grueling. According to others, her methods were on the harsher side.

Yet there are results. I can feel them myself. Just two days in, and my combat skills had sharply improved.

She, like Liana, is a new professor who took up her position this year.

But what's peculiar is, unlike Professor Liana, she has no classes set up?

At best, she's only responsible for the combat lectures for a special admissions student… which is to say, myself.

I'm not sure why she holds the title professor, but at The Cradle, this isn't considered anything out of the ordinary.

After all, The Cradle itself seems to have fused various educational institution systems.

In the beginning, given the era, it was somewhat ad hoc, but with time, they've attached various things and it has evolved.

The naming scheme is a bit of a mess to begin with. While they mimic the style of a military academy, students are called cadets, but teachers are referred to as professors instead of instructors.

There's a system akin to choosing one's desired subjects in college, but then there also exists a set curriculum like during a free semester.

And though classes are divided by year, during the aforementioned semester, lectures are attended in the afternoon based on one's major and grade…

It all gives the impression of a jumbled mess.

– Drip

I completed my simple wash-up. After carefully turning off the faucet and patting my face dry with the towel, I emerged.

I didn't really apply any skincare products to my body.

Even in my original world, I had found cosmetics to be a hassle and ignored them, not feeling the importance of skincare, until Agapansus's nagging led me to at least apply some moisturizing cream.

What was it again? Skin? Toner? Essence? This and that… Despite their different names, they all seemed about the same to me.

Regardless, while I had applied them carelessly in my original world, here I didn't feel the need to do so even more.

I threw on some clothes casually. What I wore could hardly be called attire; it was just the casual wear provided by The Cradle.

Not a formal attire resembling a uniform, but rather a pair of clean-designed sweatpants with a hood.

Finish with socks and arm covers, and that was it.

The arm covers have become just another pair of socks for my hands. I've gotten used to wearing them so now there's no discomfort.

I stuffed a handful of nutrition bars into my pocket and stepped out of my room.

I had mostly finished the nutrition bars by the time the elevator reached the lobby. Passing through, I arrived beside the bus stop visible from there.

"Ergh…"

I stretched my arms up high, did the same with my legs, and then twisted and turned my body, performing some stretches.

The stiffness eased a bit. I took a deep breath and kicked off the ground. The cool dawn air brushed across my face.

I could've taken the bus, but with no hurry pressing me, I decided to run there using my own legs, a sensation of speed I wouldn't have felt before.

It had been, what, only five days? In such a short period, my body had grown considerably.

Growth that began when I became a superhuman. The rapid pace of development amplified by The Tower of Growth's blessing, and further intensified due to my special admission status.

As my growth had just started, the change in my physical capabilities was acutely perceptible.

It must have been barely 20 minutes of running before I reached the entrance to my destination.

It wasn't an old-fashioned training yard filled with hard dirt and sand but rather brimming with the green of grassy blades.

It was one of the parks easily found within the grounds of The Cradle.

Crossing the entrance, the light of dawn and delicate mist greeted me. The central lake was particularly enshrouded in fog.

I followed the walking trail deep inside up to near the lake. Checking the time, I saw there was still a bit of leeway until the appointment.

I glanced around and then sat down on the grassy ground speckled with weeds.

This was a first-year's area and, considering the time, there were no people around.

"…Sniff, sniff."

Sitting idly, a breeze passed by, and I inhaled without thinking. I used to enjoy the scent of grass-filled places like this, so it was a habit of mine.

And yet, there was no scent. The fresh grass smell? The cool crispness of dawn? Nothing.

'…Augh.'

Doing it instinctively only to find nothing there was frustrating. Any uplifted spirit was driven back down.

Life really loses its flavor like this.

While I was reviewing the previous day's sparring in my head, someone entered the range of my spatial perception.

An immense amount of mana. The amount was so great, it made me doubt if it was even possible for a single person to possess that much.

"Ah, were you here already?"

[No, I just arrived early because there's nothing for me to do.]

The eyes that always drew my attention, even amid the pervasive green leaves, were a lovely shade of green.

A warm-colored turtleneck sweater that went up to her neck and a black long skirt.

Instead of the magician's robe she would usually wear in the classroom, she was dressed in casual clothes.

Liana smiled brightly at me and reached out her hand. What she offered was a picnic basket.

"?"

"I got a little held up because I had to pack this. Let's share it as my apology!"

Having said that, Professor Liana briskly moved to a nearby table without waiting for a response.

I paused for a moment to think and then followed Liana.

Opening the basket on the table revealed neatly arranged sandwiches and there were also fruit drinks she had brought.

"Here! A special gift for you!"

She picked out an exceptionally full sandwich and an orange-flavored drink and handed them to me.

[Thank you.]

After expressing my gratitude, I accepted the sandwich and drink. I briefly examined the contents and then took a bite from the edge.

…Naturally, it had no taste. It was a depressingly flavorless experience. As I chewed, Liana spoke.

“How is it, does it taste good?”

[Yes. It’s delicious.]

Or so I assumed it would be.

“I’m relieved to hear you say it’s delicious!”

She grinned in relief and then bit into her own sandwich.

Maybe it was because of the early morning, but the weather felt cool. Yet, with the change in my body, it felt more refreshing than chilly.

Early in the morning, leisurely snacking on sandwiches at a misty park table gave a profoundly peaceful feeling.

“Let’s finish up here and take a short break before we head in.”

[Yes.]

My meeting with Professor Liana wasn’t for any particular reason.

Somehow, after her introduction last time, Professor Liana had developed a sense of guilt towards me and had offered to help me get started with mana.

Mana.

A symbol representing superhumans along with unique abilities.

Many superhumans don't have unique abilities. Unique abilities are a crucial power for superhumans, but not all can have them.

They are powers born either congenitally or barely developed through strenuous postnatal efforts.

However, mana is something that just about every superhuman deals with unless they are a very rare case.

Just utilizing mana can bring about phenomena that shatter the common sense I used to have.

Currently, I have no clue how to handle mana. Precisely speaking, my mana affinity suggests I could, but I have intentionally refrained from doing so.

Despite possessing unique abilities, I'm still a novice with little knowledge.

I thought it best to receive guidance from a skilled individual like Professor Liana, which is why I've been holding myself back until now.

Initially, I focused solely on spatial perception to compensate for my lost sight.

After gaining a new perspective with spatial perception, I dabbled a bit in cooking recipes and various techniques, merely to brush up on my general skills, and with Atra's sparring, I've touched upon swordsmanship, hand-to-hand combat, spearmanship, and footwork, among others.

Now, it seems about time to also start with mana affinity.

All three of my unique abilities are passive, not active. Furthermore, they all resemble omnipotent abilities, so it's efficient to work on them simultaneously.

A clue I hooked during the freshman welcome event. If I were to juggle these three together, I could expect some sort of synergy.

A faint sense of anticipation made my heart flutter.

CHAPTER 20
MANA (2)

“The origin of mana. Is it energy emitted from within a star, life force possessed by a living being, or a completely different origin of power… Discussions like this are premature, yes? Let’s remember just one thing.”

I had finished off the sandwiches.

I had eaten a few nutrition bars, so my stomach was full, but since I needed to eat a lot to build my body, I diligently devoured the sandwiches.

“Mana is a resource! It is used and consumed, recharged when you wait, and a resource that causes phenomena through its use!”

After eating and cleaning up.

I sat cross-legged on the grassy field near the lake, keenly listening to Professor Liana’s explanation.

“Everything contains mana, and humans possess it as well. Even ordinary people who have not awakened hold mana. Then what is the difference between superhumans and ordinary people?”

Everything contains mana.

The weeds growing around me, the water in the lake, the vegetation rooted here and there in the park, and the earth damp with the morning mist.

All harbor mana, faint but perceptible if I concentrate.

Professor Liana, right in front of me, also has mana. Near the lake, there exists a colossal mana, enough to dismiss the lake as a mere puddle.

“The difference is exactly… whether you can use mana effectively!”

And I have mana too, me who has never used something called mana in my life.

“Everyone possesses mana, but ordinary people can’t use it! However, superhumans are different.”

Thump – long fingers pointed at my solar plexus.

“In humans, the overwhelming majority forms a core near the heart to hold and refine mana.”

It’s the vessel for mana and the center of life activities.

For humans, the core is located near the heart. Separate from the heart, but undoubtedly connected, is the core.

“Can you draw mana from the core and use it? This is what distinguishes ordinary people from superhumans!”

Ordinary people, the average person.

Superhumans, those who are extraordinary, beyond average.

Can you use mana? Just this one difference changes a lot.

“Now, we’re getting to the important part! Focus!”

Clap – Professor Liana clapped her hands to draw attention and stretched out both arms.

“My left hand. For Lee Hayul, that’s on the right, yes? I’ll flow mana into it.”

Professor Liana’s core, so vast it is compared to an ocean, stirred and flowed like a rippling stream into her left hand.

“Do you feel it? If you have sensitivity, you’ll sense it, otherwise it will just look like a bare hand.”

I felt it. Not solely the mana wrapped around the hand but also the mana flowing smoothly through her entire body and the tremendous mana lying dormant in the core.

I nodded my head.

“Next is my right hand!”

Mana flowed from the core into her right hand. The procession was the same as before.

The changes started in the next moment.

– Humm.

A sound brushed past my ears. Not an actual sound that could be heard, but more like a ringing in my ears, or rather, it was noise made by the spatial perception trembling.

The mana contained within the right hand coiled and clustered. It condensed, coming together to form a certain pattern.

– Humm!

This time it wasn’t just an auditory illusion. In my spatial perception, now distinguishing colors, I could feel Professor Liana’s arm, enveloped from fingertip to forearm in shining blue mana.

Meaning, it was visibly discernible with the naked eye.

“This is qi! A technique that’s essential for students specializing in combat… especially those in vanguard positions. Even the lowest-ranking heroes, if they can master qi, can survive gunfire.”

In this world, guns exist and are used as well.

Grade 4, Grade 3, Grade 2, Grade 1, Special Grade.

Dungeons are divided into these five ratings, where Grade 4 dungeons are handled by the lowest-ranked heroes and hunters, but a considerable number are dealt with by armed soldiers.

Monsters emerging from Grade 4 dungeons are at most of the lowest rank, the 8th echelon.

Though occasionally 7th or 6th echelon creatures appear, they are typically 8th echelon.

At that level, simple firearms can take them down.

Starting from the 7th echelon, hunting them down with guns becomes difficult. In such cases, magical artifacts are used, or a few heroes accompany the troops.

“Qi techniques. You will need to utilize this in the future so remember it well, and now back to the other side!”

She lowered her blue-coated right hand and lifted her left, still wrapped in formless mana.

“—”

A low whisper escaped her lips. And yet, the mana enveloping her left hand stirred.

If the array of qi in the right hand was simple and repetitive, the mana in the left hand was tangled in a complex form.

– Woosh!

The entangled mana burst into flames in an instant. Showcasing the change rapidly, Professor Liana floated the flames above her palm and continued while looking at me.

“And this is magic. Quite different from qi, isn’t it?”

[Yes.]

I nodded blankly. From the operation of the mana to the moment of manifestation, I felt the entirety of the process, which made the difference even clearer.

– Woosh.

“However, we are not learning these today.”

With a clenched fist, the flame and qi disappeared.

“Our learning objective today is the operation of mana! Let’s set aside qi and magic for later and take it step-by-step with simple mana operations!”

Thus spoke Professor Liana, clenching her fists with what seemed like a surge of passion. With a hesitant nod, I acknowledged her.

“Then… let’s start with this.”

She extended a hand holding a fist-sized green sphere. The sphere, a crystal orb crafted from mana stone, was quite filled with mana.

“This is a crystal orb, processed from mana stone. It’s often favored for basic mana operation practice.”

I extended both hands carefully to accept it. With a smile on her face, Professor Liana squat down opposite me.

“Using Lee Hayul’s mana is also good, but in terms of practicing ‘operation,’ there’s nothing like this crystal orb.”

I knew what it was. A device used for mana training that had made brief appearances in the original story.

“Your body’s mana is easy to manipulate because it’s under your control. But this crystal orb is different. It contains mana that is distinctly not your own! Without an owner, it’s like unclaimed territory and harder to manage than your own mana.”

I stroked the crystal orb. Its smooth, cool surface made contact with my fingers. Professor Liana chuckled and tapped my hand.

“First, you insert your mana into the crystal orb. Second, use the mana you’ve inserted as a hook to draw out the orb’s mana. Third, absorb the mana you’ve drawn out.”

We’ll proceed with these three steps.

Having finished speaking, she fixed her gaze on me, probably waiting to see how I’d fare before giving instruction.

After nodding, I carefully observed the crystal orb with spatial perception. The mana

filling the orb was rippling like water in a bottle.

After focusing on the orb, I nudged the mana within my core.

“The first step won’t take long. You must start by feeling the mana within your body before you attempt to manipulate it.”

The mana, jolted awake from slumber, rippled tumultuously. The feeling of mobilizing mana for the first time was oddly complex.

Was it the sensation of warmth filling my heart? Regardless, I had managed to awaken the mana and swiftly moved on to the next step.

I cradled the bottom of the crystal orb with my left hand and covered the orb with my right.

I coaxed the mana from the core, guiding it to my right hand. I soothed the mana, sluggish as if just roused from deep sleep, as I moved it along.

“You seem to have the sensitivity for it, so it should only take half a day to manipulate… huh?”

The mana delivered to my hand – it was time to undergo the first process. Somehow manipulating the mana, I shaped its tip into a point like a protruding spike.

– Thud.

“Ek?”

I thrust it into the crystal orb. Not that the orb shattered. Precisely speaking, it wasn’t the orb itself but the mana within the orb that was pierced.

Mana burrowed its way through. Ensuring it didn’t break off, I maintained a constant supply of mana, burying it deeper.

Finally, I stopped the mana pillar that had penetrated to the center of the orb.

Now onto the second process.

I envisioned a straw as I manipulated the mana. And now it was time for it to

function. With concentration, I hoped the straw would act like a magnet and drew out the orb's mana.

– Humm…

"Eh…"

The mana in the crystal orb trembled. It seemed to resist for a brief moment before losing strength and getting drawn out through my makeshift straw.

Mana didn't just get pulled through the straw; some also spilled out like a burst geyser due to the resultant hole.

It felt unsatisfactory. The mana dissipating into thin air seemed like a waste.

I would gather it all. I had the intuition that I could, given my unique ability of mana affinity.

I collected the escaping mana, attracting everything in the vicinity. With an intent full of greed, the mana was drawn out and absorbed into my hand.

"Er…"

The core is located near the heart.

Just as there are blood vessels extending from the heart to transport blood throughout the body.

There are circuits extending from the core to transport mana.

Like a reverse flow, I brought all the absorbed mana back to the core.

The core was small. Comparing it to Professor Liana, whose core was so large it was indistinguishable, mine was barely the size of a bean.

It was possible. Intuition whispered to me. I could gather it, I could handle it all.

– Thump.

My heart suddenly beat hard. In response, the core also pulsed, expanding its size

confidently as if saying it could accept it all with ease.

'It's done.'

One by one, I coaxed the mana from the crystal orb into the core. The newly housed mana, awkward like it had just moved into a new home, was soothed by me, blending it with my original mana.

……

…

– Tingle.

A thrilling sensation swept up my spine. A sudden surge of elation filled me, reminiscent of what I had felt at the welcome event for the freshmen.

"Hoo…"

I exhaled breath that seemed to have been trapped inside. I let out a breath that would fit a body twice my size, which relieved some previously felt tightness.

Yet, my insides still felt stuffed. Like I had crammed food in forcefully. Huh? What was I just doing?

My foggy mind sharply cleared. My spatial perception, which had involuntarily switched to radar mode, returned to its original function.

The dazzling sunlight reflected off the lake's surface. The dawn mist had vanished.

And there was Professor Liana, squatting in front of me, gawking with her mouth agape…

"Wow…"

Noticing that I had come to my senses, Professor Liana let out a sigh with a twitch of her mouth.

"Is this why you're a special case…?"

“?”

Mystified by her words.

CHAPTER 21
MANA (3)

When I came to my senses, I realized I had achieved the study goal.

Professor Liana had handed me the crystal orb and seemed to be suggesting that I just give it a try, and without a second thought, I resolved the issue in an instant.

I inserted mana into the crystal orb, extracted it, and sucked it into myself for storage.

It was a simple procedure. It took barely 30 minutes. It was so straightforward that I wondered, isn't this supposed to be normal? My head tilted in puzzlement.

"For a beginner… especially someone who has just started, this is definitely not a simple feat."

Professor Liana firmly shook her head.

She said she thought I would have already satisfied the ability to sense mana. That's why she brought the crystal orb, which required the application of manipulation.

According to Professor Liana, normally it would take half a day to link mana and make a hole to pull it out and another two days or so to absorb it.

Also, it would be a lot if even 20% of the whole were absorbed.

So today's goal was to cultivate the necessary manipulation skills for linking mana…

"…But you've finished it all at once."

[That's good, right?]

"It's incredible."

With a dismissive shake of her head as if in disbelief, Professor Liana answered

bluntly.

“We’re still at the beginning, but with this, the talent assessment is complete. Absolutely certain.”

The nuance of her words implied a positive outcome. I had never properly used my unique ability, mana affinity, and had some anxiety about it, but seeing Professor Liana speak that way, it seemed like mana affinity was indeed a useful unique ability.

“Class ended unexpectedly fast today.”

Twiddling with the now colorless crystal orb, Professor Liana let out an awkward smile.

“It can’t be helped now.”

Just as I was worried something had gone awry, she recomposed her embarrassed demeanor and assertively indicated she had a next plan in place.

Indeed. It seemed she had contingency plans for when the first one collapsed.

“Let’s take a comfortable break!”

“?”

Is that the right course of action?

.

.

.

While I felt that I was progressing smoothly, inwardly I worried if I was actually going too slow.

After all, I possessed knowledge from the original work. According to the latter episodes of the original story, around this time would be prime for gobbling up all sorts of hidden pieces and in full swing with spec upgrades.

According to the records of the previous episodes, the unnamed dungeons were cleared with trickery, all sorts of elixirs and superior artifacts were consumed… suitable characters were sought out to be killed and robbed…

Those episodes not only showed relentless progress but also efficiently dashed towards quick choices, displaying bizarre growth indicators and limits.

“Your thoughts are commendable, but it’s not going to work.”

I had time left and asked if she could teach me something else.

I was flatly rejected. It was quite a decisive reaction.

“Strictly speaking, even if I wanted to teach you, rest would be better for you right now. Don’t you feel something odd in your stomach?”

Professor Liana shook her head as she spoke, and I pondered for a moment.

Indeed, it felt bloated like I had overeaten. Not to the extent of becoming nauseous but enough to be bothersome.

“See? That’s normal if the amount of mana suddenly increases significantly. It’s better to wait until things stabilize rather than forcing training.”

[Understood. I will rest for now.]

“Good. You’re an obedient student.”

Clearly, Professor Liana’s point was logical. Instead of insisting on learning more, it was better to agree and rest.

I nodded, having understood.

Professor Liana then let out a contented smile and reached out to stroke my head.

I flinched unexpectedly at the sudden contact.

“?”

“Ah, did that make you uncomfortable?”

No, not really… But why the sudden touch…

As I shook my head with hesitance, she seemed relieved and continued stroking my head.

It felt like she was petting a puppy, yet the sensation was somehow comforting and odd at the same time.

“If you really insist on a lesson, I’ll give you some guidance, very simply… the class that teaches you how to fall asleep anytime, anywhere!”

After stroking my head for a while, Professor Liana clapped her hands satisfyingly.

The class about falling asleep instantly. I tilted my head, not fully comprehending. It didn’t sound particularly practical at first mention.

Then Professor Liana clicked her tongue and flicked her index finger.

“Think about it. Whether you become a hero or a hunter. There will be tasks that can be finished quickly and others that will take a long time.”

There are dungeons that can be wrapped up in a day. Yet, most dungeons require several days to properly deal with them.

This is under the assumption that the dungeon has been fully assessed and a sufficient number of people are deployed just for subjugation.

The task of exploring dungeons with unknown threats.

The time it takes to understand the dungeon’s principles and traps, staying alert for monsters that can appear at any moment, cannot be finished in just a few days.

This is where the importance of detection-type unique abilities lies.

Even for dungeons understood long ago, it is recommended to be accompanied by a detector in case of unexpected situations. Not doing so for newly assessed dungeons? It’s an invitation for disaster.

“Dungeons inherently take up time, as does being on guard. Add in being deployed at a front line, and the duration easily surpasses several weeks.”

In other words, missions often extend over a long period.

“Especially at the front lines, the skill to ‘fall asleep anywhere, anytime’ is even more necessary. Are you getting the picture now?”

That’s when I began to understand.

I had occasionally seen it on MeeTube. Soldiers in trenches catching sleep despite shells falling around, unforgettable because they were clinging to their guns even in sleep.

Certainly, it seemed like a lesson worth learning. And if I thought about it, there were indeed lectures related to sleep among the general courses.

“Now, lie down!”

Pressed by Professor Liana, I eventually and carefully laid myself down on the grass, feeling the faint vibration from the ground.

“And close your eyes… Sorry, that was a slip of the tongue. I really didn’t mean it… no bad intentions…”

[It’s okay.]

“Really sorry…”

There was a minor hiccup, but I brushed it off lightly. Perhaps because I was already fatigued, just by lying down, sleepiness began to creep in.

“Ahem. There are two things you need to pay attention to while falling asleep.”

Firstly, don’t fall too deeply asleep in case of emergencies.

Secondly, decide intervals and sleep intermittently.

“Sounds easy when spoken, but actually doing it is hard. It’s more of a habit than a skill. So, if you start preparing a bit now, it will be helpful in the future.”

I nodded at her words.

'Hoo… '

To fall asleep, I brushed aside unnecessary thoughts. Keeping in mind the two points of caution, I let my consciousness sink.

Of course, it was less comfortable than a bed. There was no blanket to keep me warm, no pillow to cradle my neck or hug.

But there was a certain charm to it.

It had taken roughly 30 minutes to extract the mana from the crystal orb, right? The time was still early dawn, and the unique ambiance of daybreak had its own peculiar allure.

"Do you find it difficult during your major classes?"

Quietly submerging myself into serenity.

Professor Liana, who had settled comfortably nearby, observing the surroundings, suddenly asked with a cautious look.

The major course hours… that would be Atra's lectures.

'Difficult… '

The first day was running to the point of fainting.

The second day was running. Swordsmanship sparring…

The third day was running, spear practice sparring…

And several other various strenuous tasks…

After pondering for a moment, I tapped my smartwatch.

[It's okay.]

Obviously, it's tough. It's painful enough during the sparring to bring tears to my eyes. It's something I don't want to do.

Perhaps only those with a peculiar taste for pain actually want it. I'm not one who derives pleasure from pain, nor do I possess the qualities of a hard worker who intentionally seeks hardships.

But who in this world actually wants to be in pain? Who would willingly seek tough tasks?

Everyone dislikes it. Everyone hates difficult and painful tasks, yet everyone is enduring them.

Because otherwise, they can't survive. Because they need to do something to live.

I am no different. I am nothing special.

If I don't struggle now, the future will only get tougher. So I'm rolling with it now.

At my response, Professor Liana tilted her head with an intricate expression. She seemed to ponder for a while, then let out a laugh, surprising me with an out-of-character remark.

"Atra can be quite a pain."

"…!?"

I found myself gaping aimlessly, not expecting such words from Liana's mouth, nor did I expect her to speak ill of Atra.

"Hehehe. Look at your reaction."

Amused by something, she burst into laughter. Covering her mouth with one hand, she snickered for a while, only for the laughter to eventually subside.

"I have a bit of an acquaintance with Atra. You know, we often crossed paths on the African front lines."

Africa.

It used to be humanity's land, but now it's a territory ravaged by monsters.

It's a region that comes to mind as iconic for 'demonic borders,' where active heroes

and hunters are most active.

“Sometimes caught up in missions, acting as temporary team members… having worked with many, she was inherently rigid, prickly, hard to communicate with – oh, how I struggled back then.”

If not for her lacking skills, she would have been rebuked. As Liana spoke, she vigorously shook her head as if repulsed by the memory.

“She fundamentally isn’t a bad person but… uh… maybe she is? Seems filthy, like her expressive nature is filthy, hmm… it’s difficult to explain.”

[Professor Atra was active on the African fronts as well?]

“Not only in Africa. She probably traveled around a bit, but she’s been pretty much stationary in Africa in recent years.”

I nodded, an ambiguous feeling washing over me.

Liana and Atra. I had never guessed they would have an acquaintance with each other.

And I had heard that Atra was a top-tier hero with achievements on the African front lines.

It was quite an interesting story. Liana, seemingly effortless in talking, continued to chat about her entanglements with Atra, smiling gently.

“If lectures are hard, you can say you don’t like them. You may see her as a fussy witch, but she has her reasons for having such a temperament… and if you speak up, she might change her approach.”

I also received advice that it’s okay to quit if it gets too unbearable.

Upon closer look, Liana’s treatment of Atra seems quite harsh.

A witch with a nasty temper and an always serious demeanor… It sort of seems to fit when I think about it…

But such idle banter came to me like a lullaby, and my consciousness gradually

slipped away. With Liana nearby, I felt reassured that nothing unforeseen would happen, spurring on the drowsiness.

‘One hour. I’ll wake up in one hour… ’

I reminded myself, trying to ensure that I would not fall deeply asleep.

However, the sensation of my head being stroked gradually led my consciousness down into deeper slumber.

“…He’s already fallen asleep.”

The last thing I remember was Liana’s peculiar expression.

CHAPTER 22
MANA (4)

Liana had grown weary of hearing the word “talent” throughout her life.

When she was born.

Her innate mana capacity effortlessly surpassed that of others by tens of times. Her affinity for mana was excellent, making it easy for her to control it.

Her manipulation abilities naturally improved. Although she was still too young to have awakened her unique ability, no one doubted she would become an outstanding superhuman.

The awakening of unique abilities.

An elemental-type unique ability so rare that it was truly exceptional, like counting on one’s fingers. That was the period when expectations for her skyrocketed.

And just like that, swept up by the atmosphere, she somehow became a hero, and before she knew it, she was fighting on the African front lines.

There were her own choices involved. Thoughts like it was better to save people than do nothing, and later, after earning a lot of money, she could retire comfortably…

Regardless, having lived the hero life for quite some time, she incessantly encountered the praise of her talent.

Those with a bit of renown were invariably talented beings.

Innate talents for mana, magic, martial arts, and unique abilities…

Talent, talent, talent.

She had heard it countless times. Talent sprung up in every sector imaginable, and all around her, talented people were as common as dirt.

For a moment, memories from a seemingly distant past to the not-so-distant past flashed by.

The sky was still blue today. It was different from that over the African front lines.

Liana turned away from gazing vacantly at the sky.

In the grass not far enough to measure a difference in strides.

The boy who had swapped his initial upright posture for a curled-up position, now emitting even breaths in sleep, was in sight.

“Pfft.”

A chuckle escaped her lips. The scene was endearing. He already had a cute appearance, so every little thing he did seemed adorable.

Was this the consequence of appearance supremacy? Or was it the charm of Lee Hayul’s placid nature?

Whichever the case, watching him inspired a desire to stroke his head.

Occasionally, his body twitched. Now that she thought about it, Lee Hayul seemed particularly sensitive to cold.

Liana, just in case, took out the outerwear she had brought and laid it over Lee Hayul.

The moment the coat was draped over him like a blanket, he seemed content and curled up even more, emitting a purring sound.

He had now completely burrowed into the coat.

Trying not to laugh at the scene, Liana held her breath. She almost burst out laughing.

Having held in laughter for a while, she gradually calmed down. Stifling her still pounding heart, Liana recalled the scene from a moment ago.

The crystal orb processed from mana stone. A tool frequently used for cultivating

basic mana manipulation skills.

There were three steps in the process.

The first stage was making contact with the mana in the crystal orb.

Breaking through the resistance of the said mana to carve a hole and extract it was the second stage.

Absorbing the extracted mana was the third stage.

For Lee Hayul, who was at the initial stage of mana introduction, the process was even more challenging.

Before those three stages, one had to be aware of their own mana and know how to operate it.

The crystal orb served as a medium for that. Barely noticeable alone, but with two placed side by side, their characteristics became more apparent.

Thus.

Lee Hayul had to be aware of his own mana, operate it, draw it out to contact the mana in the crystal orb, punch through with operation, then collect and make his own the scattering mana.

Here, Liana judged that Lee Hayul had to have talent related to mana.

He was a special admissions student. There had been no precedent for a student of his status to be admitted.

The headmaster, who, excluding the messages conveyed through the vice headmaster for decades prior, had entirely cut off external activities.

With conspiracy theories claiming she might actually be dead, she had concealed herself somewhere in The Tower of Growth for many years.

In the midst of this, the vice headmaster relayed her message.

They had selected a special admissions student.

Thinking back to the commotion at the time, even now she shook her head in disbelief.

After various events, the person who entered The Tower of Growth and now slept soundly before Liana's eyes was Lee Hayul.

She too was quite shocked when she learned of the situation.

Putting aside the process and the cause, the headmaster herself had personally chosen him, so she believed he must have talent.

Indeed, from what she heard from Atra, he possessed a subtle talent.

– 'Subtle talent?' Not outstanding, nor insignificant, what exactly does that mean?

– As said. Even I couldn't quite grasp it. He learns quickly, but… something is odd.

– Eh?

According to Atra's assessment. An odd talent…

Although she was unsure of its meaning, since he was said to have talent in martial arts, maybe he had talent in this area as well.

She had planned to confirm this and to personally guide him if he did have the talent.

Therefore, Liana had intended to watch Lee Hayul struggle with the crystal orb just once. She needed to know what the issue was if she were to point anything out.

And then Lee Hayul, focusing on the crystal orb.

In an instant, he had wrung the crystal orb dry, greedily absorbing every last bit. It was like a starving beggar devouring food after days of fasting.

It was a remarkable event. The original three stages – in Lee Hayul's case, nearly five with self-awareness and manipulation, were all completed at once.

If that had been all, Liana would have simply marveled at Lee Hayul's talent. She would have been relieved thinking he had talent and would have pondered how to teach him.

Making contact with the mana, piercing through, extracting it, and absorbing the released mana.

Astonishing, yet not unprecedented. Liana herself had done so. Though Lee Hayul was much quicker, it wasn't inconceivable.

However, there was a difference between Liana and Lee Hayul.

The amount absorbed. Liana had barely managed half? Lee Hayul had taken almost all of it. He was overwhelmingly fast, and he had taken twice as much.

And that was not all. The reason Liana felt not only admiration but also strangeness was what happened next.

Liana glanced around subtly. The grass on the ground seemed faintly deprived of vitality.

It might be her imagination, but when she closely compared it to the grass further away, there was a discernible difference.

Above all, when looking closely at the mana, it was clear that the concentration of mana in the vicinity had significantly thinned.

The area of influence wasn't large. At most a radius of 2 meters.

What was crucial was that beyond the mana of the crystal orb, the ambient mana of the surrounding space was also absorbed.

And even more crucially.

In the current situation, the most serious question.

Liana raised her right hand. The spot where she had placed her hand on Lee Hayul while he was holding the crystal orb, to give a signal.

Astoundingly, unbelievably.

Lee Hayul had absorbed Liana's mana as well.

Of course, it was possible because she had mana wrapped around her exterior, and

because she did not resist.

If she had wanted to resist, Lee Hayul wouldn't have been able to breach her mana at all.

…Would he really not have been able to?

While thinking this, Liana couldn't dismiss the small, lurking doubt in her mind.

Atra said it. An odd talent. Something intrinsically different from normal talents.

Liana felt it too. Although in a different category, she also judged Lee Hayul's talent as alien.

What to make of it…

Liana's gaze swept over Lee Hayul, the colorless crystal orb, the vegetation around, and her own right arm.

Could the analogy be this?

It was as though his access permissions were different. Something about his mana affinity seemed different from the norm.

She understood why Atra, even with her insistence, took time to pinpoint it. It was indeed distinctive.

Liana chuckled and reached out her hand. She touched the soft locks of hair.

It was an addicting sensation.

* * *

Shin Seo-yul is an early riser in the mornings.

There was no particular reason. She liked the uniqueness of the morning air. It was cool but not too cold, and the sensation refreshed her inside. She enjoyed the soft warmth of the sun, not overly hot.

So occasionally, when she woke up early in the morning, she would go jogging.

Dressed in comfortable gear with a sports towel lightly soaked in water around her neck, she'd enjoy a brief sprint.

Running, enveloped in the morning air with a suitable tempo, gave her a liberating feeling as though her chest was clearing up.

Afterwards, indulging in snacks brought from the dorm while sitting somewhere nearby was bliss itself.

Just having finished jogging, the taste of cool, sweet coffee poured into a body that's starting to heat up is an indescribable joy.

"……"

The hand holding the 8,500 won (including sales tax) coffee trembled slightly. She didn't suffer from Parkinson's. She was a healthy girl who was not prone to minor ailments.

Yet her hand shook. Her face turned cold. It wasn't just due to the chilling dawn air but also because she felt a sense of chilliness.

The park around dawn was imbued with an atmosphere that cut sharply through the greenery. Her gaze was drawn towards the scenic walking paths among the trees which added immense charm to the park.

And then she saw it.

Lee Hayul was curled up, fast asleep on the grass near the lake.

Cute.

This was her first impression. Wasn't his appearance designed to emphasize cuteness?

The features were delicate and smooth. Seeing his face, ridiculous as it was, he seemed prettier than her at times, and upon looking again, handsomely ridiculous.

The critique that he was a golden parachute or a biased special case was being swept away, no doubt partly because of that appearance.

Truly, there was no need for another fairy.

Once, Hong Yeon-hwa had compared Lee Hayul to a fairy in passing.

Whether it was a slip of the tongue or not, she realized her mistake immediately afterwards, leading to a moment where her expression turned to stone.

Afterwards, a memory sticks where she and her friends were teased for being charmed by a 'fairy' and got hit a few times in return.

Back then, they all laughed uproariously, but seeing Lee Hayul now made the 'fairy' comment resonate in agreement.

But! However!

That's not the important part.

Near the lake, covered in the dawn's mist with Lee Hayul lying there… and the woman seated so primly beside him.

Shin Seo-yul had to admire the beauty of the woman even in her own eyes.

In this vibrant place, her green eyes were exceptionally captivating.

Liana Velus.

The professor in charge of the entering class.

As a member of the elite class, Shin Seo-yul had no direct acquaintance with her. At most, she had met her a few times when visiting Hong Yeon-hwa or Baek Ahrin.

Therefore, she was oblivious to their situation.

Why were they together this early weekend dawn?

Why was Lee Hayul so comfortably asleep beside her… even covered with a coat? It clearly didn't seem to belong to Lee Hayul…

Why Liana was stroking Lee Hayul's head was also an enigma.

Was there some situation? One thing was clear: Shin Seo-yul, as herself, neither knew if there was a situation nor if there was supposed to be one.

In that moment, Liana turned her head. Their eyes met. For a second, Liana widened her eyes then let out a tiny laugh, lifting her index finger to her lips.

– Shh

Shin Seo-yul's shoulders jerked at the voice that seemed to permeate her ears.

It was telepathy, communicating directly with the other party through mana.

Not exactly an ability from the backup team with psychic-type unique abilities, but a technique sometimes used by rather skilled superhumans.

"……"

Shin Seo-yul remained silent for a brief moment, then nodded her head. Liana appeared content with the response, a smile playing on her lips.

Shin Seo-yul turned her back and left the park, not stopping her steps until that peculiar gaze vanished.

Without realizing it, what was once early dawn had given way to morning. People were starting to become active.

Shin Seo-yul stopped walking and furrowed her brows, thinking of her friend.

The friend with a fiery temper yet showed good aspects once acquainted, the red-haired friend who played the role of a punching bag, always giving enjoyable reactions when teased.

The girl who never diminished her temperament even in front of her parents yet acted coy in front of Lee Hayul as if she were a sheltered maid.

There was an incident where the friend made a mistake, and the boy asked whether she liked candy…

The way Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes looked at Lee Hayul…

And now, the scene from moments ago. Liana, covering him with her coat and caressing his head while he lay asleep in the park…

After collating various pieces of information accumulated over her lifetime, Shin Seo-yul daringly predicted one conclusion.

A full-length drama unfolded in her head.

“Oh…”

Shin Seo-yul shivered at the shocking conclusion she reached and shook her head.

“Yikes… that’s a tough opponent.”

Regardless of being her friend, this time Hong Yeon-hwa’s opponent was a formidable one.

CHAPTER 23
SPARRING (1)

Sunday morning arrived, marking the end of the first week's schedule at The Tower of Growth.

As usual, I rose early in the day.

There was no luxury of lazing in bed, still drowsy from sleep.

For breakfast today, as well, I settled for a nutrition bar. I couldn't taste anything, so I felt no appetite, but I still had to get nutrients somehow, so I regularly ingested nutrition bars and vitamins.

I considered doing some exercises after changing into my usual attire, but then felt the need to review my plans and stopped.

'Is it already the start of the second week… '

I sat at my desk in my room, deep in thought.

I intended to summarize the results so far. It had only been a week, yet I had gained quite a bit.

I scribbled on the learning pad provided by The Tower of Growth with a pen.

'Physical abilities.'

It had only been roughly five days, but my physical abilities had noticeably increased.

Just becoming a superhuman charged with potential, the multiplier from The Tower of Growth's blessings, the additional multiplier for being a special admissions student, and Atra's intense lectures.

All of these had spurred on my growth, and after merely five days, the development was evident.

‘Mana.’

Yesterday, Liana had helped me with the introduction to mana.

Thanks to her, I managed to successfully initiate into mana and now I truly ranked among superhumans.

Of course, I had only just begun basic operation.

I can’t properly use Qi, muscle strengthening, or basic magic yet, so there seems to be no difference, but just being able to control mana means a lot has changed. It wouldn’t be wrong to say that another acceleration in growth has been applied.

‘Unique abilities.’

Spatial Awareness, Jack-of-all-Trades, Mana Affinity.

I began to utilize all three unique abilities simultaneously.

Though I couldn’t deeply comprehend them yet, I had a feeling that something was improving in subtle ways. I planned to understand more about this during the sparring with Atra.

Of course, even this is merely standing at the starting line.

I haven’t even constructed the ‘own’ yet, not to mention properly grasping my capabilities…

Unique abilities are usually innate from birth.

Like how the Gop-hwa and Changhae clans inherit the unique abilities of their founders.

They can be passed down through family lines or in some cases, individuals awake entirely different unique abilities on their own.

Acquired postnatally? Not out of the question.

There are certainly superhumans without unique abilities who awaken them through arduous effort after they’ve already awakened mana.

I don’t fit into either category.

I didn’t inherit through prominent lineage nor was I born with overpowering talent.

Nor did I acquire them through a lifetime of effort.

None of it. I just luckily fiddled with game character settings and ended up with them.

Thinking about unique abilities and their restrictions… again, it makes me furious.

Unknowingly, I furrowed my brows. I spontaneously recalled that damn game that added another twist to my already twisted life.

In ‘Savior’, when you create a character, you usually choose one ability to carry over.

You can take any common ability scattered around the universe, or a special effect ability.

Alternatively, you could start with your bare hands, without taking any ability at all.

That’s why my first playthrough was a mess. Declining an ability and choosing to start wit my bare hands out of a desire to enjoy the vanilla game. As a result, I completely wrecked it.

Ironically, I survived the longest during my first playthrough…

Anyway, there is a screw loose in this settings section.

There is one ability you can initially choose.

Through the setting called ‘restriction’, one can add special modifiers to the player for each restriction they take on.

Commonly, if a player accepts one restriction, they combine it with the one they were initially meant to take, ending up with two abilities.

But not with this trash game.

You don’t get anything from the first restriction. If you accept one restriction, the

total abilities gained is just one.

The initial restriction is practically just a ploy to get the second restriction and ability.

What kind of dog crap system is this? I emailed the developers but just got a formal reply saying, 'That's how they intended the setting.'

The first restriction you accept basically means you don't get anything; it's a loss-making deal.

I'd love to throw it away if I could, but to get the second and third abilities, I had to carry this baggage.

After aligning the ratio as Ability 3: Restriction 3, only then could the game begin.

'Tch.'

The formal email from the developers. Even this is questionable. What is the identity of the company? Who are these people who made such a crappy game?

I don't know. As much as I want to, I didn't have the luxury of time to care about that matter due to the circumstances… So, I had to let it go. I'll look into it gradually when I have time.

Next question.

The original world and the world within the game.

The realistic world where abilities called 'super powers' did not exist, and this side of the world, filled with fantasies such as mana, unique abilities, dungeons, and towers.

I am Lee Hayul from the 'original world'. That's what I'm currently confident about. There's no other way for me to judge otherwise.

I am Lee Hayul, who remembers the crappy old home, who fled from the burning house to end up wandering until I was taken into an orphanage.

The orphanage burned down as well, and I eventually settled down somewhere after

wandering aimlessly. That's who Lee Hayul was.

Then what about this place? Who's Lee Hayul in this world full of imaginary elements?

This has been a question from the beginning.

I believe that Lee Hayul from the original world has come over to here.

But there are doubts. Before I arrived here, an identity of mine already existed.

If this were a game, I could just pass it off as a setting. But since I've accepted this place as a real world, I can't just let it slide.

So I took advantage of some free time to inquire about my identity today.

Since it still maintains the framework of South Korea, many of the websites I knew existed here as well.

Thanks to the internet, it didn't take long to get the documents sorted out.

I thoroughly reviewed various documents displayed in hologram.

[Yeonseong Orphanage]

Records from 0 to 7 years old. Discovered as a newborn left at the gate and the entry procedure was followed. Listed as missing or dead due to a fire. Detailed records were lost to the fire.

[Ilbo Orphanage]

Records from 8 to 18 years old. Missing but found after a year and a half. I was discovered blind and with severe burns on my right arm at that time.

Then went through procedures to be admitted to the orphanage. But due to the physical disability and living like a lifeless doll, there were no particular records worth noting.

A fire occurred just before I left the orphanage. Reports state I did not sustain any special injuries during that fire.

‘Hmm… ’

I raised an eyebrow. A shiver ran down my spine as I rubbed my arm.

Yeonseong Orphanage. I have no idea what kind of place it is. I’ve never heard of it before. Does anyone even remember the name of their orphanage?

But…

‘Ilbo Orphanage.’

The name was familiar to my ears. How could I forget? It was the name of the orphanage I stayed at.

It’s profoundly unsettling. Or more accurately, should I say horrific? Even when the name was exactly like Lee Hayul’s, I had my doubts, but now there are too many similarities that it gives me the creeps.

The only different part is the initial part about Yeonseong Orphanage.

In the original world, that was the time I should have been at my parents’ house. The common element is the fire.

My parents’ house was destroyed by a fire, and the orphanage in this world was destroyed by a fire, too.

And then there’s the common point of wandering around for almost a year.

At the time, I truly thought I would die. It seemed like a given as I lost consciousness with my right arm ablaze.

But I opened my eyes. Somehow, only my right arm was left with horrific burns.

Before even figuring out why, I spent my days wandering from place to place, clutching my starving belly.

Then I ended up being admitted to another orphanage, which was Ilbo Orphanage.

At that time, I was an unregistered ‘ghost child’. It was only after arriving at Ilbo Orphanage that I heard my birth was registered and established with family records.

*Sigh… *

I felt exasperated to no end. I leaned back in my chair and let out a deep sigh.

My head was in chaos. Just dealing with the situation here was head-splitting enough. When I checked, I even had debts registered in my name.

It seemed that I had dabbled with financial institutions for living expenses. The amount was tens of millions of won. It's questionable how a loan was granted with little credit back then.

Fortunately, thanks to The Tower of Growth providing regular funds for maintenance of dignity, I could avoid being squeezed for money immediately.

But considering the interest, it would be best to pay it off as soon as possible. Once I surpass the lowest rank of heroes and hunters, I should be able to settle tens of millions of won quite quickly.

'My head hurts… '

There was so much to think about that it was giving me a headache.

I slept soundly next to Liana yesterday, so it was less pronounced, but starting today, the hours of sleep will be reduced again, and my head will start to ache.

Did she mention a sleep course? It was harder than I thought. I didn't expect to wake up just 1 hour after lightly dozing off.

Who would have guessed I would sleep for hours straight? I was astonished at the fact that I fell asleep soundly while being covered with Liana's coat.

At first, Liana laughed and said that everybody goes through it, but to be honest, it's not without a sense of embarrassment.

'Was it the third week?'

The memory suddenly sprang to mind as I pressed down on the desk in shame and then tapped on my smartwatch. I brought up the academic schedule file I had downloaded last time.

Today is the weekend of the first week.

On the Monday and Tuesday of the third week, there's a mandatory dungeon exploration schedule for first-year students.

A schedule that groups 4-5 students from each class and sends them into a Grade 4 dungeon to perform tasks.

It's planned as an overnight, two-day trip.

Dungeon exploration and monster subjugation are essential parts of a hero.

That's why the academic schedule regularly includes dungeon raids and monster elimination.

Following the dungeon raid, in the fourth week at The Tower of Growth, there's the entry into The Tower of Growth.

The Tower of Growth, which is synonymous with the existence of The Tower of Growth itself.

The benefits are twofold. One is the blessing of growth granted to the students of The Tower of Growth, and the other is the entrance ticket to The Tower of Growth.

Within The Tower of Growth, the already enhanced growth rate is amplified further, and one can experience special trials provided by the tower.

Furthermore, even if the body suffers injury or loss of life during the trials, it all remains illusory.

In other words, no matter the method, everything is expelled to the outside at the end of the trials.

All negative traces, like injuries, disappear completely, and all positive aspects, like growth, are included in what's expelled.

The dangers of real combat cannot be overstated, but inside the tower, one can experience combat without the risks to life and limb.

And this with an enhanced blessing of growth than usual.

As one of the most critical events for rapid growth at The Tower of Growth, students enter The Tower of Growth for a long five-day term.

I pondered deeply.

The dungeon raid is in two weeks, and entry into The Tower of Growth is in three weeks.

Nearly a month. Since it will be after entering The Tower of Growth, that should be enough time to have grown considerably.

Given this rate of growth, perhaps after about a month, I can start using my knowledge from the original work to wander dungeons.

I already had the first dungeon I intended to conquer in mind.

A dungeon near a small town in England. The reward obtainable there is my goal.

The Necklace of Confession.

An artifact that vocalizes the murmurs spoken inwardly by the wearer.

It could even be used as a confession drug, but the conditions make it ill-suited for general use. However, my current situation is quite different.

It's one of the methods to bypass the Curse of Silence.

With just that, this damned Curse of Silence is essentially nullified.

'Good.'

I've set a near-term goal. Now that I have a realistic target, I feel even more motivated.

With that firm resolve, I stood up from my seat. The goal alignment was complete, and now I was ready to get moving.

….

And just like that, the second week at The Tower of Growth began. It was an

uneventful week of steady growth.

I used my head during general lectures, and during major lectures, I rolled both my head and body.

I rolled, but always forward, and I could distinctly feel myself progressing, little by little.

These were fulfilling days.

“A Cadet Lee Hayul, I request sparring with you.”

The unexpected event occurred on Wednesday.

During the general lecture “Fundamentals of Practical Swordsmanship”.

A fellow student, looking over in my direction, spoke up.

He was a male student with a sharp impression. Despite masking his expression with impassivity, there was a distinct sense of discontent radiating from him towards me.

“……”

…It’s not like I was attacked by monsters, nor was it a life-threatening situation.

I guess this might just be part of an ordinary day.

CHAPTER 24
SPARRING (2)

"All right! It's the dawn of our second week! Everyone, heads up… and, oh, we've safely passed the first week. That's great news. They say well begun is half done, so let's continue to grow well!"

Inside the dawn-lit classroom of Ipchun, Liana stood by the podium conducting the morning roll call.

"Although you all have seen the academic schedule and were informed on the first day of the first week… still, I shall announce it again!"

Instead of the casual attire she donned on the weekend, she was now clad in a robe-like garment that resembled a mage's attire.

'…Could that also be an artifact?'

A change since my introduction to mana.

Before, I wasn't able to read mana in much detail, let alone the magical formulas that made up spells – I could only glimpse at those inscribed on household products at best.

Now it's different. I'm able to read through the formulas inscribed on household products entirely, and I can make out what before appeared as mere clumps of mana.

Liana's robe was the same. I had thought it was just a robe doused in mana, but upon closer inspection, it turned out to be woven with innumerable and complex formulas.

It was likely a high-ranking artifact.

That's when Liana's gaze turned toward my direction.

Her green eyes blinked, and the corners soon softened into a gentle curve.

– Hmm.

I sensed a short resonant sound. A faint ripple of mana emanated from Liana's body. I was taken aback by the exquisite manipulation of mana that formed a thin thread of mana flying towards me.

– Hello?

I flinched at the voice that seemed to enter my mind.

At first, I thought it was a hallucination until I realized it was Liana's mana that had reached me.

'Telepathy… This is my first time experiencing it.'

It's a technique used occasionally by superhumans who are adept at manipulating mana. A downgraded version of the telepathy-type unique abilities.

Something currently beyond my ability, but with my mana affinity, it should be possible someday.

I straightened my shrugging shoulders and nodded my head.

Satisfied, Liana, with a smile on her lips, scanned the crowd.

"……"

Hong Yeon-hwa shot me a side glance. She turned her head as if to ask why, but when I did, she looked away as if it was nothing.

"In the third week, as you all know, we have the dungeon raid schedule! To be precise, it will be conducted over two days, Monday and Tuesday, of the third week."

Dungeon raids.

An obligation that's hard to evade once you start operating as a hero.

The Tower of Growth is an educational institution aimed at nurturing heroes. Therefore, the majority of academic schedules are related to hero activities.

“The type is a periodic and simple subjugation of a Grade 4 dungeon. We included three combatants and two supports within each team. I’d like to clarify that the teams were balanced taking into consideration positions and scores!”

In the past, dungeons were objects of terror.

Appearing out of nowhere and gradually devouring territories, eventually causing collapses that contaminated the surroundings and scattered waves of monsters.

And now?

High-level dungeons are still objects of dread and caution. Upper-tier dungeons… messing with a Grade 2 or 1 dungeon could instantly shatter the vicinity.

Yet, low-level dungeons aren’t such a crisis these days.

What was it again? From what I heard, armed with guns, about tens of soldiers can subjugate a Grade 4 dungeon.

Of course, if it’s full of traps, it’s a different story. But if it’s simple and ejects only low-tiered monsters, like the eighth grade, they said it’s manageable.

Right after the Great Cataclysm, lower dungeons were a threat due to the lack of competent human resources and their sheer numbers,

but these days, they’re basically money pits.

They’ve become so manageable that even farms have sprung up. Would the heroes of the chaotic period flip if they saw this?

“The team members will be announced right before the strategy. The intention is to foster cooperation with random teammates in case of emergencies!”

I nodded at Liana’s explanation. Indeed, temporary teams and the assembling of parties occurred frequently on the front lines.

“Now! That concludes the explanation! Let’s all prepare well and have a great week!”

With that, the roll call ended, followed by the general lecture.

....

Perhaps because the dungeon raid schedule was next week, the morning general lecture was crammed with theories related to dungeons.

There were settings commonly featured in the original work, and some not mentioned or entirely different.

I had been thinking, and it seems that the knowledge from the original work isn't particularly useful in this area.

Even if there is a setting that matches, it's only superficial knowledge, and the in-depth content wasn't included in the original work to begin with.

Of course, it's not completely devoid of content related to the metanarrative of the world.

For example, content related to Baek Ahrin's 'mask'…

But that, whether in the original work or here, if spoken aloud, would lead to disastrous consequences.

I had experienced it myself during the 11th round.

Back then, I was a character in the latter half with a wildly growing curve, so I could reverse the situation and kill Baek Ahrin and escape, but now, I could only see myself being utterly destroyed.

Regardless, since the dungeon is involved in obtaining the Necklace of Confession in the near future, and also as a means to release a curse, I focused on remembering dungeon-related theories.

While doing so, my body was also put through the motions. Training with Atra was still as challenging as ever.

Was she intent on introducing every existing weapon to me? On Monday, she handed me a long battle-axe, then on Tuesday, a metal gauntlet, and we fought.

Apparently, she's caught on to Jack-of-all-Trades. She's probably thinking it's a combat-type unique ability.

Thanks to her, my proficiency in Jack-of-all-Trades has been increasing rapidly. With all the variety I've been exposed to these days, the growth rate has exceeded expectations.

And so, Wednesday arrived.

Unusually, there was also a swordsmanship subject today. The previous two days were filled only with dungeon-related theories.

"The sword has always been a favored weapon across all ages. It was the primary weapon of humanity for thousands of years in the ancient history before the Great Cataclysm, and even in the era that used gunpowder instead of mana, swords were still utilized."

During the first-year general subject "Fundamentals of Practical Swordsmanship."

Instead of the old-fashioned training ground that Atra and I frequently used, I stepped into a training hall painted in blue and light gray with a near-futuristic design.

The Ipchun class had a capacity of about 80 if I remember correctly. Despite that many students entering the hall, it still felt spacious.

After having the students stand, the professor in charge of practical sword techniques began with a brief introduction to the history of swords with a stern expression.

He was a middle-aged man with solid facial features, reminding one of rock. His well-groomed beard and combed-back hair were striking.

Although he appeared stoic, the aura he exuded was enough evidence of his skills.

"The fundamentals of practical sword techniques are about observing and practicing the real combat sword techniques spanning from ancient times to the present, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each."

Practical sword techniques. It was a lecture I was familiar with.

The subject generously provided swordsmanship proficiency relative to time, so it was essential in any round that included handling swords.

I even had a bit of knowledge about the professor.

According to the main storyline of Part 1, he was Nam Kyung-joon, a hero ranked around the 1,120th for individual combat.

He was affiliated with 'Yukgwang,' the villain eradication department of the association.

The protagonist who suffered a severe injury to one arm during a villain subjugation and retired, became a professor at The Tower of Growth—was that his story?

That's as much as I remembered. The main reason for my memory was that he was a professor of a swordsmanship class and a character who shone rather brightly without much background.

"First, I will personally demonstrate the basics of sword forms. Afterwards, each cadet is to analyze and practice the forms physically. Sparring between cadets will also be allowed during this process."

The professor drew his sword from his waist. The sharp blade caught the light, emitting its characteristic cold sheen.

"The sword technique to be analyzed is the Daesam Swordsmanship which consists of three basic stances and six sword forms."

The professor ended his explanation and assumed his position. Then his sword traced the air.

He employed six sword forms that began with three foundation stances.

The caster was skilled, and even the basic sword technique seemed sharp.

He had one injured arm, yet could he really make such movements?

The execution of each sword form was clear, making it easy to absorb.

I concentrated my mind, scrutinizing every movement. Each one was going to be carefully stacked up as sword proficiency.

"Haam…"

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been standing nearby with her arms crossed, let out a small yawn. She had a bored expression earlier and now seemed to be fighting sleepiness.

I pondered for a moment, then rummaged through my pocket. I took out something I had saved beforehand and offered it to Hong Yeon-hwa.

“Huh?”

Hong Yeon-hwa blinked, stopping midway through covering her mouth with her palm, and turned her gaze towards my outstretched hand.

“Oh…”

Her pupils quivered in surprise.

What I held out was a piece of candy. It wasn’t as fancy as the upscale candy that Hong Yeon-hwa had been giving me lately, but it was said to help wake you up.

The flavor was supposedly lemon… but I wasn’t certain. In any case, it’s a bestseller and the reviews say it’s tasty, so maybe it isn’t bad without any bold claims.

“Are you giving this to me…?”

I would have liked to throw up a hologram, but as one hand was extended, it was impossible.

Instead, I just nodded, and Hong Yeon-hwa’s lips quivered. She hesitatingly took the candy I offered with trembling hands.

“…Thank you.”

She then gingerly patted the candy held in her fist. Gratitude dripped from her voice.

…Her reaction was a bit extreme. Compared to the one I gave, which costs less than 2,000 won, the candy I received from her individually cost tens of thousands won with that insane pricing.

They say it’s the thought that counts in a gift, but with such a price difference, I was the one feeling embarrassed for offering it.

The professor's demonstration had ended. After receiving the sword techniques on my smartwatch as a text, we had time to practice them on our own.

While Hong Yeon-hwa disappeared after being called by a friend, I read through the Daesam Sword Technique manual.

'Complicated.'

I thought it looked intuitive when the professor demonstrated it, but the written content was impressively extensive.

Why each stance was developed, how it connects with the sword forms, how to execute and counter such sword forms, and so on…

Although it was quite detailed and looked quite difficult to read it all, understanding it thoroughly would be helpful.

I skimmed through the manual for the time being.

– Clack, clack.

Footsteps approached. It was inevitable. Numerous people were moving inside this training hall, so of course, I'd hear something.

The footsteps echoed near my ears because they were heading straight for me.

Via Spatial Awareness, a male cadet strode toward me.

"?"

I don't know him. He wasn't hulking, but he was robust. Seeing the muscles on his body, he seemed to be specialized in combat.

[Do you have any business with me?]

As I typed the query on my smartwatch, the male cadet's eyebrows twitched. His gaze shifted between the hologram, my eyes, and then my mouth.

Hesitating for a moment, he then spoke with a decided expression.

“I request a sparring match with Cadet Lee Hayul.”

“……?”

My mind froze for a moment. He was requesting a spar. With me…

Do I know this person? Racking my brain, I found no memory of him. We’re just from the same class. And come to think of it, we’ve never even greeted each other.

I felt like a question mark hovered over my head.

Then, a female cadet looked our way, panicked, and rushed over. Splat – her palm struck the male cadet’s back.

It was such a crisp sound that it made me flinch.

“Ouch!”

“Yaaak! Are you insane? Why the sudden madness? Ah, sorry about that. This friend here is a bit dim-witted and lacking in sense, a poor child really…”

“No, wait a minute…”

The commotion caused by the arguing couple drew everyone’s gaze.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been chatting with her friend, also looked this way. Her expression soured, and she strode over.

The girl who had been yanking the boy’s hair looked at the approaching Hong Yeon-hwa and squealed in terror.

“This fucking… Hey, knock it off with your nonsense—”

[I’ll do it.]

“—Just… huh?”

The girl’s face turned ashen with confusion.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had quickly walked a few steps closer, tilted her head to the

side as well.

Realizing my words were too brief, I tapped on my smartwatch again.

[I accept the sparring request.]

Silence fell around us.

CHAPTER 25
SPARRING (3)

The sparring was swiftly prepared. The reason being that the professor approached in person to understand the situation and began readying the facility.

Since I was a special admissions student, I suppose this sparring match required extra attention.

Cadets who had been swinging their swords individually also began to gather subtly. It was certainly a sight to see.

The sparring would make use of one of the designated sparring arenas in the training hall.

As I checked the condition of the sword provided to me and strapped it to my waist, Hong Yeon-hwa stealthily approached.

“Hayul, are you really sure you’re okay?”

[Yes. I’m fine.]

“If you’ve accepted reluctantly, just let me know. I’ll settle it for you.”

And she added that she could settle matters if I wasn’t really okay.

Worry was dripping from her eyes. Looking anxiously over at me, then menacingly across at the male cadet on the opposite side of the sparring arena, and back at me with concern…

…One thing I was certain of was that asking Hong Yeon-hwa to ‘settle’ this might lead to bad results.

Perhaps due to her nervousness, Hong Yeon-hwa seemed unaware of her friend looking at her with a shocked expression from a moment ago.

“Given your current situation, accepting a spar from that guy is crazy. You really don’t have to accept it.”

[It’s fine. I accepted it because I think it’s necessary for me.]

I repeatedly reassured Hong Yeon-hwa, waving my head and telling her I was okay.

It wasn’t just flippant reassurance.

I truly felt that kind of sparring was necessary.

Training with Professor Atra.

It’s not divided into distinct levels, but rather, from beginning to end, it all leads to sparring, leaving me unclear about my own level.

I’m certain that I have grown. I can confidently say that if I were to fight against myself from the first day of running, I could knock myself out in a single hit.

But against other cadets? I’m not sure. I can read their movements through Spatial Awareness. I can predict their next moves to some extent.

Compared to my own movements, I can see that I’ve grown considerably.

But if you ask me whether that means I can win in a fight… I don’t know.

There are few absolutes in a fight. Professor Atra always emphasized this.

She would say that the strugglings of the weak could sometimes inflict fatal wounds on the strong, meaning one should never let down their guard.

Cadets’ movements are readable. Those who I presume to be from the advanced class are daunting, but still within my perception. The ones below them are quite readable.

But I haven’t actually fought them yet. The outcome is unknown. That’s why it’s necessary to face them head-on.

I had wanted to try this before and after entering The Tower of Growth, but it’s not too bad to try it now.

“From now on, the friendly sparring will commence. Each cadet, take your positions!”

The professor shouted once the preparations were complete.

Leaving behind a worried Hong Yeon-hwa, who looked as if she was watching a child play by the water’s edge, I stepped up to the sparring arena.

The arena was vast. It was several times larger than a UFC ring I had seen on MItube. It wasn’t civilian-standard but rather superhero-standard, which made sense.

The male cadet climbed up from the opposite side, a sheathed sword in hand.

The confusing part was that he looked very tense, despite being the one requesting the spar. He was even sweating profusely. It made one wonder why he requested the spar in the first place.

Constantly glancing to one side, curiosity got the better of me so I looked in the same direction to see Hong Yeon-hwa with a fearsome expression staring at the male cadet.

Ah, now I understand.

After confirming that both the male cadet and I had ascended to the arena, the professor operated a mechanical device near the arena with a hologram keyboard.

– Vroom!

Mana embedded beneath the arena stirred and shot up in a definite shape around the perimeter.

The mana rose rapidly to form a rectangle that enclosed the sparring arena. Despite my shallow knowledge, it seemed to be a protective magical formation.

“The rules are in accordance with those of a friendly sparring match! Both robust body techniques and Qi are permitted, and the overseeing professor reserves the right to stop the spar at any time on their judgment!”

Srrrng, I pulled the handle I had been gripping. A chilly sound of appreciation accompanied the drawing of the sword.

As it was issued for training, it was a practice sword with a blunted tip and edges.

The male cadet, who looked unnervingly tense, also assumed his stance.

“Combat major, Aidan Reynolds. Please take care of me.”

‘…Ah.’

Was I supposed to introduce myself too? Amidst growing tension, my lips involuntarily parted.

After a brief silence, I switched the sword to one hand and tapped my smartwatch.

[Special admissions, Lee Hayul. Pleased to meet you.]

Being a special admissions student, I had neither a major nor a class ranking. Consequently, my self-introduction felt shorter compared to my opponent’s.

Seeing me produce a hologram… Aidan twitched and trembled. Soon after, he got his emotions under control and took his stance.

Even to me, a beginner, the balance of his posture was readily apparent.

I, too, firmly grasped the handle of the sword.

Attention was converging on us. Intermittent whispers could be heard, but overall, everyone was silent and concentrating on this spot.

It was similar to when we had our self-introductions.

The surroundings were filled with silence, and everyone was looking here. Everyone’s attention was on this side, creating a moment tense enough to cause jitters.

I was nervous during the self-introduction. My fingertips trembled, and I made the foolish mistake of mispeaking.

‘……’

I settled my consciousness. Letting the gazes around me flow away, I balanced my

breathing. Naturally, I gripped the handle more firmly.

Tension. A feeling entirely useless in a spar, as I learned from Professor Atra. It was the same now. Setting aside the unnecessary, I focused on the opponent before me.

“Then, both parties get ready!”

‘Hoo… ’

I exhaled deeply and manipulated my Spatial Awareness. I narrowed the excessively wide range I had set compared to the arena and focused my attention on the opponent.

Dismiss unnecessary information. Collect the essential information with increased density.

“Begin!”

The moment the professor finished speaking, I kicked off the ground. My body moved with a different speed than before, thrusting my sword towards Aidan in front.

– Clang!

The sword was knocked upwards. Aidan’s eyes widened in surprise, seemingly shocked by the greater rebound force than he expected.

Quickly regaining his composure, Aidan’s sword thrust forward. Matching his movement, I swung down my raised sword.

– Clang! Clanging! Clatter…!

Sword blades scraped and clashed, sparking with each contact. The exchanges multiplied.

Responding to the incoming blows, I blocked and dodged. I seized the opportunity that arose to thrust in my sword.

The sparring took shape. It wasn’t going to end in a single blow, at least.

I assessed the situation.

'I'm slower.'

I was the one being pushed back. Both in sheer specs and in technique. Gradually, I was forced one step back after another.

Aidan's sword followed closely as if not to miss this chance. The more I swung and blocked, the more strain accumulated in my body.

But.

'It's manageable.'

It's more doable than I thought.

First-year at the Tower of Growth. A newbie who hasn't even entered The Tower of Growth, in my second week.

The current 121st batch at the Tower of Growth has a reputation as a golden generation. Right away, Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin are among them, and the overall average is higher compared to other batches.

Based on the content of the original work, they'd at least be of a lower hero rank.

Is Aidan like that too? He probably possesses a unique ability. Before entering The Tower of Growth, he must've sweated and toiled in a fiercely competitive academy.

– Sssshhh! Clanging!

Despite the opponent's higher specs, the fight was holding up.

Of course, there were parts where he was taking it easy on me. Even now, with him going easy, his specs were much higher, and he likely had plenty of leeway.

Despite looking somewhat dissatisfied, his hesitant reactions suggested no real malice.

Indeed, even in the midst of the current spar, it seemed he was being moderately restrained.

But that's his business. Just because my opponent is taking it easy doesn't mean I need to do the same. From the start, I'm at a disadvantage. I just need to focus my efforts on seeking victory.

'So.'

While reacting to Aidan's constant attacks, I racked my brain.

Professor Atra always said it. A fight is an exchange of cards. It's advantageous when the opponent doesn't know your cards, and such cards should be used at an unexpected moment, at a critical moment.

I asked myself. What would I look like from an outsider's perspective?

An unprecedented special admissions student.

But also blind and mute. Physically frail. In other words, a disabled person, less capable than average.

The reactions around me proved it. The current back and forth makes it clear as well. Although robust body techniques and Qi were permitted, Aidan didn't use them.

Because I didn't use them. Because he didn't expect me to.

For me, this is an opportunity. Even though I can only use it now, this was undoubtedly the critical opportunity that Professor Atra always emphasized.

– Clang! Clanging!

I was being pushed back. I had been forced back to just a few steps away from the protective barrier. I made it look like blocking the sword was becoming difficult.

– Clang! Crunch!

Finally, a solid sensation was transmitted to my heel. At that moment, Aidan gripped the handle tightly.

'Caught.'

He took the bait. Aidan's offensive intensified, confident of victory. It was exactly

what I wanted.

My defense gradually became shaky. That's how I wanted it to appear.

– Crack!

Suddenly, I twisted the sword. One hand, unable to cope with the shock, let go of the sword. The other hand, still clutching the sword, was flung away.

The defense opened.

Aidan, certain of victory, lifted his sword. From above to below, a powerful downward strike.

He probably thought the system of the arena would block the impact just before it happened.

– Whoooooosh…

The sword descended. The sound of the blade slicing the air was very clear.

As I am now, I cannot respond. My arm was thrown off, and I was too slow to dodge.

I had to time it just right. Concentrating all my nerves, the world seemed to slow down.

– Woosh…

As the sword came closer, leaving about a palm's width above me, I pounded the core. Bursting out with vigor, mana spread throughout my body.

– Vroom!

Energy surged from the core. In contrast to the slowed-down world, my body accelerated in a twist.

"What—"

Qi. A very basic reinforcement of the body through mana.

The descending sword brushed past my cheek. It was a razor-edge margin. Aidan's face turned to astonishment.

The opening after an attack. The opportunity for a counterattack.

He hadn't used Qi. I did. For the first time after the sparring had begun, my specs became comparable to Aidan's.

I pulled the sword that had been flung to one side. With Qi activated in my body, it performed differently than before. The sword approached with a speed that seemed several times faster.

Aidan, panicked, pulled back his sword.

– Clang!

"Ugh…!"

The sudden strike and his rushed defense were sloppy. For a moment, Aidan's feet were dragged back across the floor by the force that now rivaled his own.

His eyes widened in disbelief. He was visibly taken aback.

I did not give him the chance to regain composure. I immediately kicked off the ground.

Bang, a different sound exploded. Propelled by the force gained from the leap, I thrust the sword's tip carrying the momentum. The sword, now filled with mana, slashed through the air.

Aidan gritted his teeth as a surge of Qi rose above his body. It was Qi. The belatedly exerted mana activated his body.

With this, the specs reversed again. If this strike were to be blocked, the situation would revert to what it was before.

Aidan made several misjudgments.

First, he misread my level of skill.

He was unaware of the training I received from Professor Atra. Lacking information about me, he made a wrong judgment. He erred in thinking I would not be able to predict his movements.

Second, he assumed I wouldn't be able to use Qi.

Although it was a sensible assumption, he did not account for the possibility. That's why he left such an opening.

There wouldn't have been a major problem if it had stopped there. The upper hand in specs shifted back to him. His skills were also superior. He would likely have blocked this attack and turned the tide once again.

If it had only gone that far.

– Vroom!

Mana pulsated once more. The sword blade, greedily feeding off mana, trembled with it. The mana contained within the sword transformed.

Although crude, it took on a definitive shape. Unrefined in essence, but still, an aura that had the basics laid down.

– Crackling…!

The tip of the sword quivered. A strong sense of recoil transmitted through my arm. Nevertheless, a faint smile formed.

"……"

Aidan's expression kept changing.

At the time of the spar request, an unsure expression that seemed to ask, 'Is this right?'; an expression of surprise when the spar started; and one of shock when I used Qi.

Now, a completely blank expression. A look of doubt as to whether what he had witnessed was real.

– Clink.

The sword that spun in the air fell to the ground. The handle was gone. The cross-guard was likewise missing.

All that was tumbling on the ground was the blade with the handle missing. The handle remained clutched in Aidan's hand.

My sword was stopped just in front of Aidan's neck. It wasn't my doing. The tip was blocked by a protective barrier.

My sword's tip, however, wavered with a blue energy. A distinct color and shape from the blue protective screen.

A technique that every hero in an advance position must master.

It was the manifestation of Qi.

Aidan's third misjudgment.

He miscalculated that I would not be able to use Qi techniques.

In other words, cheers for mana affinity.

CHAPTER 26
SPARRING (4)

My heart thudded loudly. As if pressing it right next to my ear, it resounded greatly. When I absentmindedly put my hand to my chest, the sound intensified.

Aidan looked dazed, alternating his gaze between the handle-only sword in his hand and the blade scattered on the ground. He seemed not to have accepted the reality yet.

He didn't understand why he had lost. It's understandable, from his point of view, there shouldn't have been a loss.

I think so too. Originally, this should have been a fight I'd lose. By specs alone, and by simple skill, it was a fight I was supposed to lose.

If Aidan had gone all out from the beginning… No, even that thought is unnecessary.

Without the use of Qi and just relying on physical prowess and skill alone, I would have been continually pushed back and eventually defeated.

Qi and robust body techniques. I don't have enough mana to properly wield both. Even in the recent sparring match, using Qi for a brief moment significantly depleted my mana.

'Know the enemy and know yourself, and in a hundred battles, you will never be in peril.'

Wasn't that a phrase from 'The Art of War' by Sun Tzu?

I remember it means there's no danger in fighting a hundred battles if you know both the enemy and yourself.

In this sparring, Aidan didn't know me.

He didn't know what sort of training I've received from Professor Atra, how much

I've grown, to what extent my Spatial Awareness can perceive, how much I could move, or whether I could use Qi or robust body techniques.

Of course, the unknown was mutual.

I didn't know Aidan's physical level. Whether he had a unique ability, and if so, what type it was, how powerful it was, and though he would've mastered Qi and robust body techniques, I didn't know how much so.

But there was a difference.

I had the knowledge of the original work, which allowed me to gauge Aidan's level.

I knew how Aidan saw me. That he was being condescending, hence I predicted he wouldn't use his unique ability or Qi, and I was right.

So I concealed myself and when he was inattentive, I struck all at once.

As a result, I won. Aidan had relaxed and been careless, hence, a mistake allowed him to hand over a victory that should have been assured.

If we were to fight again, I would definitely lose. If we fought a hundred times right now, I would likely lose a hundred times.

That's how great the gap in skill between Aidan and myself was.

But this time, I won.

It went as planned. Winning as predicted. Even if I had lost, it would've been acceptable, but I still won.

Perhaps that's why I felt slightly pleased. Being human, I suppose winning feels better than losing.

Leaving Aidan who still hadn't recovered from the shock, I extended my Spatial Awareness normally. Only then did I see the other cadets positioned around the sparring arena.

They had similar expressions to Aidan. I wonder, a foolish expression? One of shock?

I saw Baek Ahrin with sparkling eyes full of surprise. That person is… a bit burdensome.

I also spotted Hong Yeon-hwa. I nearly chuckled.

Her beautiful red eyes blinked. Her mouth was agape wide enough to worry if an insect might fly in.

Such a look showed her shock.

I felt pleasantly amused.

No need to keep wandering around and making concessions for me, as my unique abilities allowed me to see well in all directions. Despite me saying this repeatedly, she hardly paid any attention, which had irritated me, but seeing her like this…

Just a while ago, I had calmed my emotions, feeling rather cool, but now my heart was buoyant.

The corners of my mouth twitched. A smug smile rested on my lips.

'Hehe.'

Perhaps because I felt elevated, I did something I wouldn't normally do.

I raised a hand towards Hong Yeon-hwa. Opening my index and middle finger while folding the rest, I formed a 'V.'

Unable to speak, I expressed it with my mouth shape. Communicating this way isn't easy, but perhaps a superhuman like Hong Yeon-hwa would understand even with just the shape of the lips.

Hong Yeon-hwa's reaction changed.

Her mouth opened wider. Her lips trembled, and her cheeks flushed red.

…Why is she reacting like that?

….

After the “Basics of Practical Sword Techniques” class was over, I took care of lunch in a simple way.

Today, as Hong Yeon-hwa had separate matters to attend to, I took care of my meal with an energy bar.

It’s convenient and satisfies the nutritional needs. If the quantity isn’t enough, simply increase the number of bars. If there’s a lack of nutrients, take additional supplements.

When Hong Yeon-hwa suggests eating lunch together in the cafeteria, I do eat. Even though it’s distasteful not to feel any flavors, since it’s eating with someone else, I try hard to eat my fill.

I still haven’t spoken about my lack of taste. I truly don’t know how to solve this problem.

Do I even need to mention it? I wonder if this issue would resolve itself if I just keep swallowing it like a white lie.

…No, the truth is that it’s just uncomfortable to speak about it. I know Hong Yeon-hwa isn’t like that, but I was afraid she might be disappointed in me for deceiving her this whole time.

Moreover, this isn’t strictly a disability—it’s a curse.

The curse of sensory seal. If I could just lift this, the problem would be solved. For my own happier life, I am determined to lift the curses of early death and sensory seal someday.

I thought it might be better to have started hiding it now than to awkwardly say I can taste it after the fact.

I trudged toward the old-fashioned training grounds as I took care of lunch.

“……”

While munching on the energy bars packed in my carryall, I arrived at the training ground and encountered Professor Atra, who had arrived early.

Her gaze shifted between my mouth, where I was munching, the energy bar in my hand, and the wrapper sticking out of the carryall.

….

“Make sure to have proper meals. Does it make sense for a superhuman who uses their body to resort to such half-hearted meals?”

[Yes]

And I was reprimanded.

I listened to Atra’s reproach and her advice with a frown on her face. If those are the ingredients that go into making your body, how can your body be built properly? Make sure you eat things like this when you’re looking after your nutrition.

Her advice was quite plausible following the scolding.

Training with Professor Atra was mostly like this.

Her style was rough and tough to endure. Due to her blunt attitude, she was the type people would easily dislike.

However, I didn’t particularly dislike Professor Atra.

Although her demeanor was like that, she didn’t teach me carelessly. She was sincerely committed to education, even though it was rough.

There was a bit of discontent, but it wasn’t significant, nor was it directed solely at me.

I had suspicions that she might be whacking me because she resented me under the pretense of ‘recovery training,’ but in reality, I could feel my body’s recovery abilities improving.

– Crackling…!

Today’s weapon was a longsword.

The sword I was accustomed to had a blade on either side, but this one had a blade

on only one side and was relatively elongated.

I swung the sword. Grabbing the handle and exerting force, I made a long slash. Before the line ended, I started on another.

Crack! The longsword, leaving a lengthy scratch on the ground, was propelled upwards. Powered by a faint manifestation of robust body techniques.

– Clang!

My hand was jerked violently. The longsword spun and embedded itself firmly in the ground. Suddenly, a makeshift wooden longsword was pointed at my neck.

“Your attack is clumsy compared to your defense. It’s something I’ve been mentioning continuously. You are indeed improving steadily, but keep focusing on that.”

I nodded at Atra’s nonchalant words. Looking at Atra collecting the wooden longsword and shaking her head in disapproval, I flopped down exhausted.

Today, I was beaten into a mess again. The frequency of being hit has reduced as my skills improved, but due to the increased need to move my body, the fatigue remained.

“It’s been noisy, I hear. A special admissions student took down a combat major cadet with a sword.”

Atra glanced over nonchalantly as I was catching my breath and spoke indifferently.

Lying down, I perked my ears as she continued.

“So? Have you learned anything from it?”

I could feel her gaze piercing me, as if she was indicating for me to think and speak before she did.

I pondered for a while.

‘I’ve got a grasp on my current level.’

I've caught up, albeit still insufficiently, to the heel of a combat major cadet.

It's astonishing.

Jack-of-all-Trades. A unique ability of the versatile category.

I haven't directly used Jack-of-all-Trades, but there was a round where I utilized a similar versatile category unique ability.

Therefore, I understand the downside of the versatile category well.

The advantage is proficiency correction and growth in various fields.

The disadvantage is that the limit in each of the various fields is somewhat mediocre.

Swords, spears, knives, axes, bludgeons. Being able to handle a variety of weapons doesn't mean much if you're up against someone invested in only one of them.

While the versatile category spreads its proficiency across many, a single skill category unique ability establishes uniqueness and ultimately achieves an extended ability, breaking free from the general rules.

That's why I criticized Jack-of-all-Trades as an ambiguous unique ability. The reason I deliberately chose Jack-of-all-Trades was that I had two other unique abilities, Spatial Awareness and Mana Affinity, to go with it.

If I could have chosen only one, I would have never taken Jack-of-all-Trades.

I heard about Aidan's unique ability after the sparring had ended.

Swordsmanship… in short, a skill, a swordsmanship category unique ability.

It's strange. It's undeniably odd that the sword I honed with Jack-of-all-Trades won against a sword wielded by a swordsmanship category unique ability.

Even the proficiency was overwhelmingly higher on his side. And the time spent handling swords as well.

It was a fluke. But even considering that, it was strange. Because it meant I had already caught up to the tips of Aidan's feet.

‘Synergy.’

Spatial Awareness, Mana Affinity, Jack-of-all-Trades.

Three unique abilities coexisting, providing positive effects to each other.

There can be no other reason. Luck was a big factor, but if I hadn’t grown to the tips of my toes thanks to synergy, luck would have lost its meaning.

[It was luck that helped me win, but fundamentally, we are different. If we fight again, I surely think I’ll lose.]

“I heard. You took advantage of the opponent’s carelessness and won consecutively. The strategy was brilliant. Diving into the opponent’s weaknesses was also good.”

Surprisingly, praise came my way. Luck aside, perhaps she was pleased with the victory.

I casually checked Atra’s expression with my Spatial Awareness.

Her usual indifferent look. Now when I think of Professor Atra, this image comes to mind. But just a moment ago, there was a flicker of emotion beneath that expression.

The part where she mentioned carelessness.

“However, today’s outcome was a result of carelessness. If the opponent hadn’t been careless, a result like this would have been impossible.”

My interactions with Atra haven’t been for a long time, but when you stick around a person for a considerable amount of time in a day, it’s inevitable to exchange words.

However, Atra consistently maintained her teaching demeanor, and friendly and light-hearted topics, which were far from her usual ones related to superhumans and combat, were rare.

Atra detested carelessness terribly. If I were to lose in a spar later on due to carelessness, she might just beat me to death herself.

With the keyword of carelessness, I received a subtle grimace from Atra and feedback on the sparring from a few hours ago.

I recounted the development of the sparring match with Aidan and listened to her evaluation. It was paired with her assessment and critique of the more recent sparring match with her.

And so, time flew by. Before I knew it, it was time for the major lectures to end.

“Time’s up. Today’s session ends here.”

Noticing the time, Atra declared the end of the lecture. Then she placed a water bottle next to my head and silently looked at me.

This was Atra’s kind of consideration. Her way of saying that this is the last chance to speak up if there’s anything left to say.

I was about to shake my head indicating I had nothing more to say, but just in case, I tapped my smartwatch.

[Next Monday and Tuesday, we have dungeon extraction practice. So I won’t be able to come those days.]

“…Alright.”

It was a subtle difference, but Atra’s expression shifted.

Atra really hated the topic of dungeons. Precisely, she never let on to me, but my Spatial Awareness inadvertently caught it.

I brought it up just in case. Even though she had no scheduled lectures, she’s a professor after all. She probably knows the schedule to some extent.

After conveying this, I laid back down. I planned to rest for just a moment before heading to the library.

“…?”

I was tuning my mana quietly when I noticed something odd. Atra, who should have left by now, was still standing in place.

Using Spatial Awareness, I saw Atra, apparently deep in thought, undeniably visible to me.

[Professor?]

"…It's nothing."

Looking puzzled, I asked, and Atra, after a fleeting glance in my direction, shook her head. She then turned her back and disappeared from the reach of my Spatial Awareness.

Suddenly, what is she doing?

I tried to guess for a moment, but how could I understand? I shook my head and stood up. It was time to indulge in magical tomes in the library.

….

The next day. During major lecture time.

"Take these."

Atra handed me a stack of books, easily dozens in count, all related to dungeons.

In another carryall, there was an assortment of magical tools. On closer look, most were for use in dungeons.

"Today and tomorrow, we are going to conduct lectures about dungeons."

…???

CHAPTER 27
DUNGEON PRACTICE (1)

I have no particular complaints about Professor Atra's training methods.

The training is certainly rugged. Compared to other places, it's a rigorous approach. It's not your typical method.

It feels like it's based on the premise of possessing talent. And not just any talent, but exceptional talent at that.

Basics? The sort of "learn as you fight" feel.

It seems that was actually Professor Atra's intention as well.

Didn't Professor Atra from the very first lecture say, 'Given you're a special admissions student, the expectations from the public are set'?

In other words, the training operates under the assumption that as a special admissions student, one must possess a corresponding level of talent.

It's hard. There's no disagreement there. Honestly, if there hadn't been a compelling reason to do it, I would have run away long ago.

Regrettably, I have reasons that I absolutely cannot run away from. There are compelling reasons why I must endure this intensive training.

If I ran away now, I would fall dead within at most 10 years. Until then, I'd have to live blind, unable to taste delicious food or smell fragrant scents.

Not being able to speak is manageable with some inconvenience… but the other reasons, I can't just let them slide. I didn't want to live like that.

To break the curse, I needed power. The known methods of dispelling the curse existed within dungeons, and power was needed to conquer those dungeons.

That's why I endured Professor Atra's lectures. They were painful and tough! But still, I bore with it.

Professor Atra's training was definitely efficient. It bore results. The extent of my growth was felt through sparring. I've managed to catch up to the heel of a cadet who would have trained for a good dozen years or more.

If I continue to grow like this, I can reach the dungeon that contains the method for dispelling the curse sooner than expected.

When the goal I thought would take a long time suddenly drew closer, all the more I couldn't run away.

"Here are the related books. Since you said you can read with your detection ability, take them and read them all, and if they're too much to carry, scan them with your smartwatch and keep them."

"……"

"Make sure you memorize them before the dungeon expedition begins. If it's too much to carry and read them, make use of your smartwatch, and if it's right now difficult to read, then I will read them to you."

I had disclosed some of the capabilities of my Spatial Awareness to Professor Atra. To make training efficient, it was necessary to let her know what I could see and sense.

"Check and confirm if you can read them properly."

In front of me lay dozens of books. Exactly 23 volumes. They are rather thick. I apprehensively received the books.

"Environmental Distribution in Dungeons," "Monster Cooking Dictionary," "Survival Strategy inside Dungeons (Upper)," "Survival Strategy inside Dungeons (Lower)," "Practical Herb Collection & Consumption"…

They covered everything. There were books I had glanced over a few times when I visited the library.

Monster Cooking Dictionary? It is true that monsters can be cooked and eaten within dungeons. In cases where someone is stranded in a dungeon and runs out of food,

they would need to gather plants or hunt monsters for sustenance.

I skimmed through the book with my Spatial Awareness. I could sense all the letters.

[I can read them.]

“Good. Then read them whenever you have time.”

As I was absently flipping through the books, Professor Atra began to unpack the bundle beside her. A clattering sound emerged from the package.

“These are magical tools that will aid in dungeon exploration. The plan is to handle them directly over the next two days to become acquainted with how to use them.”

With those words, Professor Atra began to take out magical tools, one by one, from the full package and lay them on the ground of the training ground. There were variously shaped magical tools in a row, including the exploratory ones often carried in the original story.

As I stood there dumbfounded, Professor Atra turned her head towards me. The magical lamp in her hand shimmered.

“Have something to say?”

[Nothing at all.]

I quickly regained my composure and shook my head. Professor Atra flicked an eyebrow and without further talk, began the lecture… not about training but about dungeons.

The lecture was surprisingly informative. She picked out only the necessary parts from the books she had brought meticulously and explained them in an easily comprehensible way, drawing on her own experiences.

It was an education focused not just on theory but on how to actually behave.

Not just which monster is of what hierarchy and how strong it is.

But, if encountered, how to deal with it, under what conditions you should run, whether it can be consumed if caught. The likelihood of what other entities exist

around that monster, and so on…

The level of education was such that even I, who have holes in my knowledge, could fully understand. This still held true, considering it was a one-on-one education.

I heard that Professor Atra was a top-notch hero, and she seemed to have a profound knowledge of dungeons that would make any decent hunter pale in comparison.

“This is a heating magical tool. It contains a small plate, but if you’ve exhausted all mana, you can directly charge it with your mana. Remember that most magical tools can be self-charged.”

“Always keep in mind the unexpected. Even when you have a short-term schedule, inside a dungeon, anything can happen. When preparing food supplies, make sure you have at least three times more than the original schedule.”

“This is an app that’s particularly useful in dungeons. Save it in your smartwatch in advance.”

Saying this, Professor Atra extended her hand toward me. On it was a magical tool the size of a human face, shaped like an egg.

It was the heating magical tool she had just explained.

“Try using it.”

I carefully received it and examined the tool in detail with Spatial Awareness.

Spatial Awareness, empowered by Mana Affinity, was dissecting the engraved magical formulas. The formulas seemed relatively simple and clear in my mind.

“‘Heat Generation’…that’s expected, ‘Minor Protection,’ and ‘Durability Increase’…nicely overlaid. There’s no conflict.”

Magic is something I’ve only glanced over in basic texts. I haven’t attempted to cast it yet, but reading such straightforward formulas was within my capability.

As I was examining the magical tool, Professor Atra reached out and took hold of my hand that was holding the tool.

‘?’

“If it’s charged, just press the button, but if there’s no charged mana left, then blow mana into it through here. Now, try it yourself.”

Professor Atra said this and moved my hand. I gathered mana into my palm in response. Ooong… the egg-shaped magical tool, having received a faint supply of mana, emitted a soft orange glow.

The warmth transmitted through my palm felt quite comforting.

But the body temperature I felt on my hands made it all feel a bit unreal.

Nodding that this was how to use it, Professor Atra stepped back.

“The other magical tools follow a similar format. I’ll inform you of other usages shortly. Next is…”

Even as I focused on Professor Atra’s non-stop lesson, I internally tilted my head.

I felt a disconnect.

…Was she always this passionate in teaching? I couldn’t shake off a sense of wariness to the change in Professor Atra’s demeanor, something different from before.

She wasn’t someone who took a lax approach to education. She was always punctual and taught all that needed to be taught.

What’s the term for this? FM? A stickler for principles? That was exactly her attitude, but now something was different… it was an actively engaging teaching that stood out compared to before.

“Listen closely. When the lecture ends, we’ll have a brief test.”

‘Eek.’

For hours, various dungeon knowledge was crammed into me.

And at the end, an actual test was given. Fortunately, I didn’t have any wrong answers.

For two days during the major subject times, I received intense special lectures on dungeon expedition from Professor Atra. It was teaching filled with various know-hows and tips.

With a head full of dungeon theory in the mornings and the afternoons brimming with similar knowledge, my mind was bursting with information.

I diligently studied since I agreed it was knowledge that would be vital someday.

One weekend day, I was educated about magic by Professor Velus. Since it was all entry-level magic, it didn't demand profound enlightenment and was easier to absorb than I thought.

Nothing special happened. The most noteworthy event was simply falling asleep for three hours while attempting to sleep train for only one, and that I was covered with Professor Velus's coat.

One day was spent in the library, pondering over magic books and trying to cram the knowledge I had memorized into my head. As I was bumbling my way around magic, it felt like I hadn't properly even entered the doorway yet.

And so time swiftly moved on, and it became Monday morning.

An email arrived on my smartwatch. It was the notification regarding the team assignments for the dungeon expedition.

I took a deep breath and opened the file. A hologram of the team assignments materialized.

[Ipchun Class 1st Team]

– Hong Yeon-hwa

– Carnel Ardellia

…

▲ 4th Grade Dungeon: 7-212 Cave Dungeon

▲ Type: Regular Monster Subjugation

[Ipchun Class 4th Team]

– Baek Ahrin

– Shin Seo-yul

…

▲ 4th Grade Dungeon: 2-64 Prairie Dungeon

▲ Type: Regular Monster Subjugation

[Ipchun Class 6th Team]

– Katsuki Yusei

– Christopher Hayes

…

▲ 4th Grade Dungeon: 7-23 Cave Dungeon

▲ Type: Regular Monster Subjugation

[Ipchun Class 11th Team]

– Lee Hayul

– Elia Slade

– Atila Blerro

– Nam Yeon-jung

– Aidan Reynolds

▲ 4th Grade Dungeon: 3-23 Forest Dungeon

▲ Type: Regular Monster Subjugation

‘Umm… ’

There were two names I recognized.

Elia Slade. Someone whom I have a friendly rapport with, pleasing to see.

And then Aidan Reynolds… a name that was rather awkward to encounter.

It was both a welcomed and awkward assignment.

CHAPTER 28
DUNGEON PRACTICE (2)

Dungeon practice takes place over two days, Monday and Tuesday. More precisely, two days is the limit. It's not allowed to exceed two days, but if possible, one can quickly complete the dungeon and take a rest.

The group assignment notice went up at 7 A.M. From the moment the announcement was made, the dungeon practice began.

Now it's time to check the team members, gather together, and head for the dungeon listed in the notice to fulfill the conditions and conclude the practice.

In the original work, if the player was determined to reduce the time, they could clear it by around lunchtime—it was a repeatable event.

– Dding!

Just then, my smartwatch buzzed. It was a notification that I had been invited to a group chat.

▷ 'Elia Slade' has invited 'Lee Hayul,' 'Atila Blerro,' 'Nam Yeon-jung,' and 'Aidan Reynolds.'

▶ Elia Slade: Hello, I've created the 11th team chatroom! (Today 7:02)

▶ Elia Slade: Shall we gather nearby and discuss the strategy as a team leader? (Today 7:02)

▶ Atila Blerro: Agreed! I'll head out now (Today 7:03)

▶ Nam Yeon-jung: Agreed (Today 7:03)

The dungeons assigned for exploration are all located inside the Shio-ram. They are preserved even after exploration and subjugation, and left as they are for future

educational purposes.

That's how vast the Shio-ram is. It's not only because of the various educational facilities and commercial establishments for the residing personnel but also because the Shio-ram grounds are teeming with managed dungeons.

▸ Me: Agreed (Today 7:04)

After leaving a reply in the chat room, I finished packing. Thankfully, all the gear that Professor Atra had packed fit into my bag, which was enchanted with space expansion magic.

After putting all the books I had been reviewing back in their place and just in case, I double-checked my luggage.

Nothing was left out. Everything was packed. Only then did I leave the library and set off.

* * *

"Over here, Hayul!"

I had arrived at the address posted in the chatroom. It was a cafe of a moderate size where everyone had gathered on the second floor. With the open-type setup without any glass windows, I could easily spot Elia waving her hand.

[I'm sorry, I'm late.]

"No, you're not late. I just got here too. Oh, and I ordered something for you just now."

Inside, four people were seated around a round table. I settled into the empty seat next to Elia.

There was Elia offering a bright smile, and there were team members sharing awkward greetings.

"……"

"……"

Still, by far the most awkward person was definitely him.

Aidan Reynolds… he was also looking over here with great awkwardness. When we bowed our heads to greet each other, it felt stiff like greeting a wooden mannequin.

The female cadet sitting beside him looked at Aidan with what seemed like disdain. She was the same cadet who had whacked Aidan during the last sparring match.

Fortunately, there didn't seem to be any leftover negative feelings from that sparring match. Had there been unnecessary grudges, it would have worried me, but it seemed my concerns were for naught.

Shortly after, an employee came in and placed drinks and simple snacks on the table. I had orange juice, and the other team members ordered their own fruit juices or coffee.

Once everyone had sipped their drink, Elia tapped the table lightly.

"Shall we start with introductions? I'm Elia Slade, auxiliary major. My unique ability is in the healing category. I look forward to working with you over these two days!"

With Elia opening up, everyone introduced themselves in turn.

"I'm Nam Yeon-jung from the combat major. My unique ability falls under the spear art category. My weapon of choice is also a spear. Please take care of me."

Nam Yeon-jung, characteristically lean yet sturdy, was discernible as a spear wielder by the spear leaning against the nearby wall, matching his unique ability.

"I'm Atila Blerro, also from the combat major. My unique ability is composite-based… involving shields and physical combat. I'll do my best."

Atila, naturally radiating a prickly aura with her sharp feline-like eyes, did not have any equipment visible. She must have kept it in a subspace pocket.

"I'm Aidan Reynolds from the combat major. My unique ability is from the sword art category."

And then there was Aidan Reynolds, whom I had met before… with an imposing demeanor.

The attention finally shifted to me, the last one remaining. I displayed a pre-written chat message via hologram.

[I'm Lee Hayul. My unique ability is in the detection category. Pleased to meet all of you.]

After the introductions, the conversation swiftly moved to the main topic. Elia, who had created the chatroom, led the discussion.

"It would be easier to start by deciding on a team leader. Does anyone want to take the position?"

Elia asked as she looked around.

Nam Yeon-jung averted his gaze discreetly. It seemed like he wasn't keen on the role of team leader.

Aidan, who was feeling awkward as he looked toward me, glanced at Atila, who was sipping coffee in the next seat.

"Wouldn't it be better if you took the role?"

"What?"

Taken aback as if hearing nonsense, Atila raised an eyebrow sharply. Already having a piercing look, her reaction made her seem even more unapproachable.

Aidan shuddered but kept his composure as he spoke.

"Usually, in small parties, the tank takes on the leader role. Here, you're the only tank."

"It is so… but…"

A tank often takes the pillar role in a party, hence, normally the leader of a party that operates in small units is a vanguard, and among them, especially a tank.

After furrowing her brows for a moment, Atila fell into deep thought.

"What's there to ponder? It's only for a couple of days at most. This might even end

in a day, so why hesitate?"

"Aren't you trying to push it onto me while being quite mouthy yourself?"

"Sorry."

Atila, who was swiftly retorting to Aidan's occasional interjections, looked exactly like someone accustomed to his behavior; their dynamic spoke of their shared history from the same academy.

"Then I'll take the role of the team leader for now. I did stuff like this a few times back at the academy, but don't expect too much."

With a scratch to her head, Atila glanced towards Elia. Elia just nodded her head in response without taking the lead in the conversation any further.

Probably thinking now that the leader was chosen, the leader should take charge. Realizing this, Atila sighed softly and continued talking.

"Let's start with planning then."

What followed was a standard strategy development session. Under Atila's leadership, we discussed the team's strength and how and when we would enter and engage the dungeon.

…

"A detection radius of a hundred meters? Constant activation? Your detection ability?"

[Yes]

"Wow…"

…

"Um… I saw the last sparring, so I have to ask if you're able to fight?"

[I'm studying combat during major class hours. I'm not skilled yet, but I can participate in a fight if necessary.]

“Oh…”

…

“What’s that staff for?”

[It’s a staff for storing mana. I’ve brought it because I can handle a few lowest-grade spells, although I’m even less skilled at using it than fighting.]

“Ah…”

The atmosphere was somewhat peculiar during the process of assessing each member’s strength, but overall, the discussion proceeded in good spirits.

The conclusion was reached quickly.

The schedule was to comfortably use the two days without rushing. While some might push for a faster approach to garner higher evaluations, our team decided to aim for stability.

Atila and Nam Yeon-jung would take the vanguard positions. In the center were me, the detection ability user, and Elia, the healer, while Aidan was in charge of the rear to be prepared for any backline surprises.

“Let’s do one last check to make sure nothing is missed, and then we can directly head out.”

It took a little over an hour. Atila swiftly concluded the meeting and led the team members toward the dungeon.

She had mentioned leading dungeon expeditions several times at the academy, and it certainly seemed like she was experienced.

And so we arrived at the dungeon.

After getting confirmation from the Shio-ram personnel managing the dungeon, we crossed over into the facility.

As I walked with heavy steps, I felt the whirling flow of mana beyond the reach of my Spatial Awareness. That must be the dungeon’s entrance.

– Wooosh…

The moment the flow of mana tried to reach my Spatial Awareness, it conveyed a peculiar tremor. I immediately retracted my Spatial Awareness and grabbed the sleeve of Elia, who was walking beside me.

“Hayul?”

[I turned off my ability in case the same thing happens again.]

“That time… Ah.”

After letting go of the sleeve, I tapped on my smartwatch. Elia questioned me and then let out a cry of realization.

I wasn’t aware that gates could be dangerous. Now it seemed odd but not particularly threatening. Still, just in case, I withdrew my Spatial Awareness.

If my condition suddenly plummeted like last time, it wouldn’t just be me affected; others nearby would also suffer.

Curiosity would have to wait for another time.

At that moment, someone grabbed my hand sharply. I flinched involuntarily at the unexpected touch.

“Don’t hold the sleeve awkwardly, just stay like this for a moment.”

The one who had grabbed my hand was Elia. She had taken my hand, which was reaching for her sleeve, and now held it firmly.

Before I could be embarrassed by the warmth of her hand, Elia was already leading me into the dungeon holding my hand.

My eyes were closed. Thanks to Mana Affinity, I could sense the position of people and the entrance of the dungeon, but the uneven surface of the floor remained unseen.

If I wasn’t careful, I could stumble, so I did not let go of her hand.

With both my sight and Spatial Awareness blocked, I felt as if I was the only one left in this world.

As I thought about this, I marveled at how I used to get around in the old days.

"?"

Suddenly, I felt a tingling sensation at the back of my head. It felt like our gazes were locked.

Before I could ponder it deeply, we entered the dungeon. It was like the lurching one feels when plunging into the sea.

* * *

Lee Hayul's figure plunged into the blue swirl. Like a shadow flickering, his presence abruptly hid away. Even the subtle sensations disappeared.

"……"

A dungeon is a space isolated from the outside. Aside from the established entrance, there is no coming and going, and there is little way to confirm what resides within.

Therefore, unless the mana concentration inside obviously skyrockets, it's difficult to determine if any accidents have occurred.

A sudden shift in mana concentration doesn't exceed a prelude to collapse, so accidents within are all the more challenging to pinpoint.

"Huh…"

What am I even doing here? It's quite pathetic, truly. A deep sigh escaped me as I reflected on the sudden thought. It's a sickness in its own right.

As I self-mocked my actions, preparing to turn my head away, a gust of wind struck from behind.

Simultaneously, a gentle voice mingled with the gust reached my ears.

"Um… I might have made a slightly rude assumption. But isn't it an unavoidable

situation? This feels completely like stalking."

"…If you're aware it's rude, the right thing to do would be to refrain."

The voice was familiar, especially often heard in the African frontlines. Atra narrowed her eyes, straightening her fluttering clothes before turning around.

The wind ceased as the woman who lightly landed, Liana, spoke with a playful smile.

"You seem to have a special affection for the cadets."

"Don't talk nonsense."

"For being nonsense, you even came to check personally. But if you've come this far, why not say a word of encouragement before they leave?"

It was a casual remark, but Atra only furrowed her brow even more.

– Take care. And always stay alert.

– Heh. This will be a piece of cake, you know? Don't underestimate me! I'll finish quickly and be back for a re-challenge, so wait for me!

It was an unpleasant memory. It was the past she had thought was buried. Atra collected her surging emotions and shook her head.

"Enough of the frivolous talk. I must be going."

The task was complete. Even now, she regretted the decision to come out and check.

Atra turned without hesitation. With no major lectures for two days, she intended to focus on personal training.

"How about a drink? It's been a while, and tomorrow I'm free from lectures, too. I found a nice, quiet place with a great atmosphere."

"Drink alone."

"Come on, it's about Lee Hayul. There are things to discuss."

"…Tch."

Atra clicked her tongue and turned away, only to see Liana beaming at her. Her face screamed, 'You can't refuse, can you?'

Having insisted on talking over drinks, she must really have such topics to broach. The issue is drinking in the process.

Reluctantly, Atra gave a nod after a moment's contemplation.

CHAPTER 29
DUNGEON PRACTICE (3)

The sense of my stomach churning was fleeting, soon replaced by the feeling of solid ground beneath my feet.

At the same time, my folded Spatial Awareness fluttered tremulously.

A shift in the environment.

It was perceived involuntarily. The smallest hairs on my body bristled in reverse.

This place is Earth. Unquestionably a part of Earth. Not a separate entity developed enough to stand alone, but rather, an adjunct space—a subspace—that only persists because it is tethered to Earth.

Yet it is also a partitioned space. This place and the outside are separate realms with different natural laws.

'Ah.'

In any case, gates merely function as bridges built within the same world.

Dungeons, tiny subspaces rooted in Earth. While they are unstable spaces that can only exist because of Earth, they are still categorically different from Earth, obeying their own set of principles.

It becomes naturally perceptible. Comprehension dawns on me. Without realizing, understanding just happens.

"…All members are inside. Commencing the expedition as of now."

Upon entering the dungeon, the three from the combat major quickly formed a triangular formation around me and Elia, scanning the surroundings.

As previously discussed, the combat majors will form a defensive formation around

the two of us from the support faculty as soon as we enter.

“Mr. Hayul, please proceed with the surrounding detection.”

I nodded at Atila, who was scanning our vicinity with a sharp gaze.

I unfurled Spatial Awareness with a sense of elation that comes from enlightenment. An influx of information flooded into the dark world.

While I had restrained myself outside the dungeon due to the experience with the gate, I was now confident there would be no issues.

Radius 10m, 50m, 100m… 200m…

Roughly about 300 meters in diameter, or is it 600 meters?

Suddenly the range expanded several times over. It’s one thing to say it multiplied, but considering that it expanded into the shape of a sphere, the volume of information had increased innumerably.

– Zzzt, Zzzt…

A flash struck my mind. It felt as though an electric current was swirling through my head.

[No monsters within range.]

“Thank you. Please notify us immediately if you detect anything unusual.”

[Yes]

My role in the dungeon expedition involves the detection of monsters and herbs. While Spatial Awareness enables me to undertake the detection, communication of the information is the issue.

Being mute, it’s uncomfortable to relay what I find, even after successful detection.

Although this issue will be resolved once I get the necklace of confession, it does not help me with the current problem.

That's why for now, I'm using a clipboard where I've pre-written information to quickly provide updates.

After meticulously scanning the area, we congregated in one spot.

Atila, who had assumed the role of the leader, coughed to draw everyone's attention.

– Thump

She thudded her massive shield against the ground. A dull vibration traveled up our legs, its heavy weight palpable.

"As discussed, our first priority is to reach Point A. We will subdue any monsters encountered along the way, but deeper incursions for the purpose of subduing monsters will be deferred."

Everyone nodded at Atila's directive.

Our dungeon expedition practice was a time-limited task. The conditions for task completion were also announced along with the team assignments.

[Ipchun Class Team 11]

① : Arrive at Point A, find the marking, establish a temporary base (35)

② : Subdue 80 Green Goblins (40)

③ : Collect 500g of Mana Herbs (15)

Team 11 had been given three conditions.

Arriving at Point A and establishing a temporary base.

Reaching the designated coordinates included in the file and setting up a temporary base.

Subduing 80 Green Goblins.

The task was to subdue 80 Green Goblins, monsters whose average hierarchy lay in the 8th tier, with some as high as the 7th, and bring back evidence of this. Normally,

trophies such as ears or fingers were collected, varying with each specimen.

Collecting 500 grams of Mana Herbs.

It involved gathering 500 grams of weeds that grow profusely in forest dungeons, absorbing copious amounts of mana. Mana Herbs are not particularly valuable on their own, but they're used as a basic component in alchemy, which explains their high demand and supply.

After forming our ranks, we steered towards the coordinates for Point A. Given that the smartwatches had a coordinate specification function, it was a straightforward task.

The party traversed land thick with trees and underbrush.

The green grass grew to about thigh-height. If it stood straight instead of curving over mid-way, it would have exceeded my height.

The trees too were incredibly large, easily surpassing 15 meters in height with correspondingly massive girth. I could divide myself into four or five and still not manage to encircle one.

Broad leaves suggested they were deciduous trees.

The air was also damp. Breathing in deep brought moist air flooding into my lungs, and droplets of water clung to every tree and leaf.

"It's a relief we have a path cleared already."

"Indeed. If we had to explore and create a path from the beginning… Haha."

If anything, we're spared the trouble of fighting through walls of grass, one by one.

A path was already beaten due to periodic subjugations. The vegetation in the dungeon was so tenacious that it needed some trimming, but it wasn't like we were hacking fresh ground, so the effort was comparatively manageable.

Atila and Nam Yeon-jung, leading the way, used short swords hanging by their waists to cut away the slightly overgrown grass.

As we walked, the only special thing to watch out for was the somewhat sticky ground.

[To the northwest, 75 meters, 2 entities.]

“Received. Keep signaling.”

Meanwhile, I continued my role in detection. With Spatial Awareness that had become broader and more precise, exploration was unhindered.

We had passed by several Green Goblins along the way. They were neither directly in our path nor in significant numbers. Since we hadn’t established a base yet, we decided to bypass them for now.

Mana Herbs were also detected in abundance. Spatial Awareness included the ground beneath, allowing me to differentiate tree roots and grass embedded in the earth.

Just the Mana Herbs we had passed along the way would easily exceed our quota.

Although the Mana Herb condition does not carry many points, there appeared to be no need to worry.

As we continued, I memorized the locations of Mana Herbs and Green Goblins we had encountered.

“Arrived at Point A… let’s survey the vicinity before setting up the temporary base.”

It was roughly two hours since our entry into the dungeon that our team arrived near Point A.

“Mr. Hayul, will you be able to find the marking?”

[I’ve found it.]

“First, let’s search for the marking while… What? Already?”

Atila blinked in surprise. I nodded and pointed in one particular direction. The team members followed my lead.

“It really exists.”

A flag as tall as a person was wedged in the gaps between thick tree roots, its camouflage color blending with the earth and grass. If not for my detection ability, it would have been rather troublesome to find.

Atila marveled as she felt the flagpole.

“Your detection ability is incredibly precise, Mr. Hayul. I’ve experienced difficulties with my academy peers due to their imprecision.”

[Thank you.]

‘I would’ve been miserable without it.’

After all, it’s the ability I traded my eyes, nose, and mouth for.

Despite it being Spatial Awareness that almost killed its owner upon first use due to its excessive performance and later being downgraded to a subpar vision for cost savings… I now feel like I can’t live without it…

Having found the marker, too, we chose an appropriate location and set up a provisional base.

Without a broad clearing to use, we just cut down some trees to make space.

Since it’s just a temporary base we’ll be using for a day, no particular measures were necessary.

Creating a spacious area and laying down magical tools for protection, security, and survival was enough.

If there had been a pure mage among us, direct magic would have been set up, but our team lacked a mage.

Elia could use reinforcement magic, but only just that, and as for me, I am still a beginner barely handling the lowest grade and didn’t offer to help.

“Uh… Mr. Hayul, you seem to have brought a lot?”

‘……’

While everyone else was rummaging through their bags in the cleared area, lots of things were popping out of my backpack, attracting everyone’s attention.

[I packed a lot just in case.]

Professor Atra had jammed a bunch of items in there. When I expressed concern about the weight, she told me the bag was also enchanted with a weight-reduction spell.

“Next, let’s search for the Green Goblin village.”

We marked our coordinates after setting up an adequate base, took a brief rest, and then got to our feet.

The first condition—reaching Point A, finding the marker, and constructing a temporary base—was met.

Now we just had to complete the second and third conditions: the Green Goblin eradication and the Mana Herb collection.

“Let’s search the areas where Mr. Hayul spotted Green Goblins.”

Green Goblins live in groups. The few that we encountered on the way, two to three at a time, were probably out hunting from their village.

Their distinct trait is their small stature. They reached the waist of an adult male, and their bodies were generally frail. By human aesthetic standards, they were deemed ugly.

In other words, they were run-of-the-mill goblins.

Finding the village didn’t take long. Focusing on the areas where Green Goblins were frequently discovered, we quickly found the location of their settlement.

The village was strategically placed with mountains behind and a river nearby—a prime location. The monsters seemed ignorantly content situated in such a spot, known in geomancy as having a mountain at the back and water at the front.

‘Quite by the book.’

Walls made of trees, with their ends sharpened and placed in a row, surrounded the inner part, where primitive tents were erected with wooden frames covered with leaves.

The village was teeming with groups of Green Goblins. There were approximately 135, disgustingly overabundant. I had wondered if we could find the required 80 within the given time, but we found the entire quota in one go.

“…Now I see why people search for those with detection abilities.”

I had jotted down the situation inside the walls, the structures, traps, and number of individuals, and Atila, who had been hiding in the forest near the village, looking down from behind a tree wall, said so, somewhat reluctantly. Nam Yeon-jung beside her nodded his head, too.

“The price for those talents is high for a reason. It’s because the number of individuals with detection abilities is inherently few.”

70% of superhumans are vanguard types. The majority of superhumans who haven’t awakened their unique abilities tend to engage in close-range combat utilizing their strong physiques and Qi.

Among the modern population, those who have awakened as superhumans are scarce, and those with unique abilities are even scarcer.

From there, detection abilities are in short supply. Even those with mediocre abilities are sought after for various tasks.

In essence, there’s a shortage of supply.

There’s even a nasty cultural aspect where those without unique abilities are derisively branded as fakes. Of course, I’m not condoning such views, but such phrases have come about because possessing a unique ability creates a significant disparity.

“One hundred thirty. Mostly 8th-tier with three of the 7th…”

Atila, our team leader, appeared pensive.

“The number’s a bit high, but since most are 8th-tier, let’s proceed with the standard protocol.”

Basically, storm in and see. It might sound reckless, but everyone aside from me nodded in agreement.

After all, excluding myself, all the team members were prominent prospects from their regions’ academies.

They could probably handle the 8th-tier effortlessly, and even the 7th-tier wouldn’t pose too much trouble.

There is a safety net in place, too. Currently, all team members are wearing bracelets fashioned from purple strings handed out the previous week by the Vice Principal.

It’s a safety device.

Upon inspection with Spatial Awareness, the magical tool was a complicated concoction of spells that could induce motion sickness.

As explained by the Vice Principal, the moment anyone suffers life-threatening injuries within the Shio-ram, protective magic deploys, and a summoning spell transports them to the infirmary.

Naturally, it doesn’t react to minor injuries. The condition is a life-threatening wound.

It’s a remarkable effect. Almost unbelievable. According to the Vice Principal’s explanation, such a miracle was possible thanks to the active support of the Principal and the fact that the dungeon was under the Shio-ram’s management.

Since the Vice Principal’s tenure, the bracelet has never failed to function. It somewhat lightened our psychological burden.

“Let’s go.”

On Atila’s command, with her shield raised, everyone gripped their weapons.

I, too, swallowed hard, gripping my staff amidst the tension.

If I dropped my guard now and ended up disqualified, getting scolded by Professor Atra would be the least of my worries. I'd risk not only missing out on a good grade but could even end up with a negative score.

For someone like me with nowhere else to go if abandoned by the Shio-ram, it was a path I could not afford to tread.

If I were expelled here, it would not be a mere suspension—it would be a life-ending move. I cannot be expelled.

Stepping on the uneven earth, I cautiously advanced towards the village.

The real eradication began.

CHAPTER 30
DUNGEON PRACTICE (4)

The beginning of the subjugation was signaled by Atila.

Usually, if there are mages with high-output spells or individuals capable of long-range attacks, one would start by striking from a distance, but our team lacked such abilities, so Atila took the lead.

– Thump!

As we emerged from the densely vegetated forest, Atila stepped into a clearing, slightly away from the palisade.

“Kek? Ke, kek!”

Incongruously stationed atop the watchtower, a Green Goblin caught sight of Atila and bulged its eyes. Making a ‘kek kek’ noise, it alerted the others to the intruder.

– Thump!

Atila’s foot slammed down onto the earth. Cracks like spiderwebs appeared on the ground. The power of her step dug into the earth, and her next step violently hit the ground again.

– Thump! Thump!

Atila was in what could be considered a heavily armored state. Not drenched in metal like a medieval knight, perhaps, but still clad in markedly thick armor.

After around five running starts, Atila’s eyes shone with brilliance. Her mana surged through her entire body.

– Kwoong!

A different sound from before. Not mere cracks this time; a portion of the earth

outright caved in. Atila, shield raised, stamped on the ground once more.

Debris from the earth sprayed backward. Her mana-fueled legs pushed her forward at an accelerated rate.

And it wasn't just that. The raised shield became enveloped in mana, cloaking it in a sinister blood-red Qi.

"Kek!?"

Sensing the ominous aura, the Green Goblin's cry grew frantic. The Goblins of the village, too, started moving about hurriedly, grabbing whatever weapons they could find.

Before they could properly react, Atila's swiftly advancing form slammed into the thick wooden palisade.

– Kwaang!

"Kek!"

At the moment of impact, the palisade Atila struck burst apart. What sounded almost like an explosion was followed by the screams of the Goblins.

Wood fragments scattered in all directions. Some Green Goblins were disoriented by the wooden splinters, and with a thump! another tremor shook the ground.

The palisade was breached in a single blow. Yet Atila did not stop there. Maintaining her momentum from the break, she trampled the ground repeatedly, leading with her shield.

"Kek! Kekeek!"

"Kek! Keruk!"

Surrounded by the Qi-wrapped shield and using her whole body for the Qi, Atila, now an embodiment of a human tank, burst through the village.

Goblins in her path exploded. Some were shattered into pieces, others were flung far, their limbs torn apart.

“Kek…”

But not all Green Goblins were dead. Those that narrowly avoided the collision clutched their crude weapons and began surrounding Atila—right then, a Green Goblin’s throat was pierced by a chilling spear.

– Kwajik! Puk—!

“Entry complete.”

The spear that followed Atila through the destroyed palisade belonged to Nam Yeon-jung. His spear, too, was surrounded by a cyan Qi, easily piercing through Green Goblin flesh and bone.

Following Atila’s lead, Nam Yeon-jung relentlessly thrust his spear forward. Goblins attempting to surround Atila quickly found their necks skewered by the incoming spear.

Atila unhinged their formation, while Nam Yeon-jung ensured the disrupted Green Goblins could not regroup, steadily reducing their numbers.

“He’s really enjoying this.”

Aidan, observing from the side, grumbled as he swung his arm. His neatly executed sword strike drew a clean line.

– Swish

“Kek…!”

A sneaking Green Goblin’s head fell to the ground. With a thud, Aidan nonchalantly kicked aside a Goblin’s body to clear the way, and I inwardly nodded.

The trajectory was certainly cleaner than what I’d seen during sparring. No doubt he had improved since then, but the experience during that fight likely played a part.

Atila and Nam Yeon-jung, the vanguard, were wreaking havoc in the village center, while Elia and I, placed in the middle, blocked the broken palisade, preventing any Green Goblins from escaping and supporting the vanguard.

The entrance to the village was already shattered, so blocking escape was easily manageable.

"—, —."

That's when Elia's lips moved.

Incantation. A form of self-suggestion for controlling mana. The easiest and most common method to cast magic.

– Voom!

The mana released from Elia formed complex patterns. Once arranged, the patterns wailed for a moment before flying toward Atila and Nam Yeon-jung, who were leaping about in the center.

Bang! A Goblin hit by the shield exploded messily. Atila flinched as a Goblin's eyeball flew past her face, but quickly comprehending the situation, she grinned savagely and stamped on the ground once more.

'Is that a reinforcement spell?'

Elia's unique ability was healing, formally called [Recovery Melody].

It designated a target for 'Immediate Recovery' and 'Recovery Amplification' effects. Elia could also adjust the ratio between the two effects, which both came along with a mild enhancement effect while active.

Due to the minor impact of the enhancement effect, Elia had sought to learn reinforcement magic separately, as she had mentioned at the café a few hours earlier.

Having an enhancement component within her unique ability meant she learned it more conveniently than expected.

I assessed the general situation. About half of the Green Goblins had already been turned into by-products.

I knew that for students of Shio-ram, handling the 8th-tier was as easy as eating cold porridge, but actually witnessing it was chilling.

If Atila were to charge at me, I, too, would likely become a scatterable by-product…

I had pegged three 7th-tier individuals beforehand. Unlike the rest, these Goblins were heftier, and the mana they wielded was several times greater than that of the 8th-tiers.

One had already become a by-product. The other two had managed to hang on to their precarious lives, using 8th-tier Goblins as shields in the back, barely maintaining their lifelines.

But this was just a stopgap. It seemed likely that they would be cleared out soon enough.

'Hmm… '

The vanguard seemed to have no issues. The Green Goblins were being blitzed like ingredients in a blender.

Elia had her mana at the ready and drew her prepared sword to watch the surroundings.

Aidan had crushed a few Goblins trying to escape through the shattered palisade and was now guarding Elia and me.

In short, there was a bit of leeway. I nodded to myself and gripped my staff.

Over the weekend, I had dabbled a bit in magic. With assistance from Professor Liana, and scribbling notes in the library.

Entering the world of magic in just a few days was a thieving mentality, but thanks to the synergy between Mana Affinity, Spatial Awareness, and being a jack-of-all-trades, I was able to touch upon several lowest-grade spells.

– Voom

I drew mana out and infused it into the staff. My staff matched the typical image one might conjure when thinking of a wizard's staff.

A body made of deep brown wood and, at the tip, a blue crystal orb.

The body was carved from mana-infused wood, and the crystal orb was a processed manastone.

In this world, there are two main roles of staves for mages.

The first is the storage of mana.

As a significant amount of mana is typically required for magic, mages often struggle with mana shortages. Hence, they carry these auxiliary batteries.

The second is as an aid in calculations.

Magic is often compared to computations. While it's not a flawless comparison due to factors like emotional influence, there are similarities in the usage of mana with precise accuracy.

Therefore, mages need a higher level of mana manipulation ability than vanguard types. Moreover, no matter how adept one is, having an aid always makes it easier. A staff serves both roles of mana storage and calculation assistance.

However, this staff is lacking in the second, the calculation assistance feature.

There was no need for intricate calculations with merely lowest-grade spells, and Professor Liana had advised that relying too much on aid could hinder the development of one's true skill.

More than anything, thanks to Mana Affinity, I had not yet encountered a wall challenging enough to require calculations.

Therefore, this staff is an auxiliary battery tailored for mana storage.

I calmly regulated my breathing and lifted the staff.

The most straightforward and iconic method to cast magic is incantation, reciting words aloud—effectively a powerful form of self-suggestion.

But I am incapable of that. The damned curse of silence seals my lips shut.

Thus, there are no incantations for me. I could undertake sign language, but the magic I was casting didn't require such extents.

– Voom

Mana released from me seeped into the staff, tapping on the orb at its tip.

It was similar to the training with Professor Liana last time. Striking the mana within the crystal orb, then drawing it out to use as a material for casting the spell.

Mana drawn from the crystal by my own mana bubbled up. Having stored ample mana, only a meager amount was needed.

But this was sufficient. I took a deep breath and manipulated the mana.

The mana converged at the tip of the staff. Focusing my thoughts calmly, I arranged the mana.

I had practiced this a few times. My inherent mana was scarce, so I would deplete after just a few tries, but I never failed those few times.

Mana swiftly concentrated at the tip of the staff, forming a bulky mass of energy. The preparation for ignition was complete. Maintaining my willpower, I aimed the staff at a 7th-tier Green Goblin.

The completed formula was triggered simultaneously.

[Mana Blade Slash]

A spell more akin to mana manipulation than magic—among the lowest-grade and perceived as such.

It's not an elemental spell like a fireball or lightning discharge, nor is it complex in composition.

It simply sharpens mana into a blade and launches it. There are basic structural formulas involved, but no accuracy enhancement.

True to its name, the spell fully embodies slinging a mana blade. It's exceedingly straightforward, hence even I succeeded on my very first attempt.

I had practiced over the weekend. A small, thin blade of mana—tinier than a Green Goblin—was ejected and dissolved into thin air after traveling around 10 meters.

The aim of using this wasn't really to reduce the enemy's numbers but to give it a try, since there was slack. If I managed to kill a Goblin with it, wouldn't that be quite an accomplishment? Just a thought.

I activated the spell.

Lowest-Grade Magic

[Mana Blade Slash]

– Kwaaaak!

"!?"

A blade slash burst forth from the tip of the staff—a huge blue blade slash, at least double my height, fluttered my clothes like a rough breeze.

Soil flew in all directions as the blade slash tore through the ground. Several Green Goblins, turning their heads at the sudden roar, were bisected vertically.

"What!?"

"What's that?"

It didn't stop there. 20m, 30m, 40m… Disregarding its usual range, the trajectory of the massive slash dissected Green Goblins and sheared off limbs one by one.

The slash eventually reached the 7th-tier Green Goblin.

A Goblin, wielding a crudely fashioned longsword, used its elongated arms to swing wildly but bulged its eyes in disbelief at the incoming slash.

– Swish!

"Keeaaagh—!"

With relatively swift reflexes, it twisted its body, but one hand was caught in the slash's path. The creature's horrible scream accompanied an arm tumbling across the ground.

The [Mana Blade Slash], after claiming the lives of about ten 8th-tier Goblins and one arm of a 7th-tier Goblin, finally slammed into the palisade on the opposite side. Swish! Only after slicing through the palisade did the slash dissipate, as if it had been wiped from the air.

A long groove carved into the soil. Rising dust swirled around. One side of the now-unbalanced palisade collapsed like dominoes. As the dust settled…

The few Green Goblins that had survived, Atila—who had been joyously slaying Goblins, Nam Yeon-jung—who had been inserting his spear to support her,

Elia beside me preparing her reinforcement magic, and Aidan who was watching the surroundings…

Everyone looked this way. Their eyes were full of shock and puzzlement.

'…?'

I had no answer for their bewilderment. I didn't understand the reasons myself.

– Patter, clatter…

Now only the sound of soil lumps falling to the ground echoed around us.

CHAPTER 31
DUNGEON PRACTICE (5)

The unexpected casting of the enhanced Mana Blade Slash seemed to have settled the situation.

One of the remaining 7th-tier Green Goblins had an arm sliced off by the slash, lying dismembered, and another was in the process of having its head fly off.

The remaining 8th-tier Goblins, which were few in number, were quickly and methodically dealt with by Atila and Nam Yeon-jung once they regained their wits.

Although everyone's expressions showed they had questions to ask, it was Atila's suggestion to wait until we reached the base for a break that kept their questions at bay, evident by the restraining looks in their eyes.

During the collection of Green Goblin ears for proof and the search for manastones or any useful items amongst the ravaged village, I couldn't shake an uncomfortable feeling from the back of my mind.

Especially the dumbfounded expression on Elia's face, who was right next to me and got caught in the aftermath of the slash and dust, was priceless.

…I'll have to apologize to her when we reach the base.

Amidst the strange atmosphere on our return, I gathered mana herbs whenever they came into sight. They were essentially weeds imbued with mana, and there were plenty of them.

Thanks to that, I was able to finish collecting my quota of mana herbs on our way back.

"Hayul! What was that thing just now!"

We arrived at the base. After we all freshened up a bit, we sat down around an egg-shaped heating magic device.

First to speak was Elia, who had cleaned off all the dust to reveal her pretty face, speaking with visible excitement.

“You said it was the lowest-grade… how does that fit the definition of lowest-grade?”

“I wanted to say the same thing.”

Atila, feigning tiredness, joined the conversation. She seemed a bit exhausted after relieving her stress by bashing Goblins.

“I figured it would be no big deal, even if it was lowest-grade, but I was shocked when that came flying at us.”

Nam Yeon-jung, who had been quietly checking the state of his spear, nodded in agreement. He too remembered being startled when the slash flew by, breaking his composed demeanor.

[I’m sorry. I didn’t know it would turn out that way.]

Despite the polite words, the underlying message was clear—it could have been serious if we had been hit.

I could hardly argue and lowered my head silently. I too had been startled, but Atila and Nam Yeon-jung, who had the slash fly past them, must have been more surprised.

“It’s okay. The trajectory was completely different… but it was still a shock because we weren’t informed beforehand.”

Atila’s response, saying it really was chilling as she rubbed her arms, made my shoulders drop even more.

Of course, I had calculated the trajectory. Although it was labeled as just the lowest-grade spell, it was still an attack, and I’m not crazy enough to blast it at my teammates.

The problem is, I had no idea it would be that powerful. Even I was taken aback by the unexpectedly strong strike.

Had it hit Atila or Nam Yeon-jung… Of course, both had used Qi and were clad in Qi,

so they probably would have avoided serious injury, but the thought was still frightening.

If it had actually hit them and that factored into our evaluation… my grade would have been thrown into the abyss.

Chills ran down my spine. My grades might have actually plummeted. My shoulders trembled slightly.

How hard I was paying attention to the lectures… I was listening as if my life depended on it, worried I might be expelled…

[It may sound like an excuse, but it wasn't that strong when I used it yesterday.]

"It changed in power just overnight?"

Covered in dust and acting somewhat offended, Elia tilted her head curiously. Maybe she too was puzzled by her knowledge of magic.

"You said it was Mana Blade Slash, right? Did you modify the formula or something?"

[No, I cast it according to the official formula.]

"Then why? Is there any reason why the power would have increased so much…"

I had nothing to say to Elia, who was wondering with a tilted head. I too was perplexed by those thoughts.

"Let's eat first! Thanks to Hayul, we've already met the conditions, right?"

As the conversation became drawn out, Atila shifted the topic.

Arriving at Point A and securing the marker.

Normally, we would have spent time looking for the marker, but I found it instantly, saving us time.

Green Goblin subjugation.

Though it was the lowest tier, a level 4 dungeon, it wasn't so small it could be

disregarded. Finding the Goblin village would have usually taken time, but with my spatial perception and a bit of luck, we quickly found and subjugated it.

Mana herb gathering, completed most effortlessly. I collected them all on the way back from clearing out the village.

Checking the time, it had just reached dinner time. The sun, which had brightened the earth, was nowhere to be found, amplifying the orange light of the central heating magic device.

We huddled together in the center of the base to take care of dinner.

"…It's tastier than I thought."

"It's not as good as eating out, though."

The dinner was emergency rations. Strictly speaking, these rations fell under the category of combat provisions.

Further inspection revealed that they weren't so bad. While I didn't have military experience to compare with, at the very least, it wasn't the sort of fare you'd want to throw away in disgust.

As Elia took a spoonful of what seemed to be pound cake and graded it with an indecipherable expression, Atila, who was heating up the combat rations, chuckled quietly.

She seemed quite familiar with these sorts of rations, having mentioned past experiences with dungeon delving during her time at the Academy.

"When I first tried it, I felt the same. It wasn't as terrible as I vaguely imagined… but it's not something I'm keen on eating willingly."

"I find it too salty for my taste."

"What are you on about, dog palate? You gulp down anything you're given."

Aidan, opening his own combat ration pack, grumbled from beside us.

Having no military experience, I was still aware that rations for battle usually have

good shelf life and are high in calories.

Especially ration packs designed for superhumans who burn energy several times the rate of regular people are even higher in calories.

Consequently, it seemed they were quite salty. I noticed Elia slowly chewing, and I took a bite of the pound cake.

…

“How about you, Hayul?”

[I don’t like it.]

Elia seemed to agree with my response, nodding her head.

We ate the dinner in a fairly harmonious atmosphere.

“Atila’s Qi color is quite unique, isn’t it? It’s usually blue, like mine.”

“Mine’s been red from the first time I manifested it. Might be influenced by my unique ability.”

Elia, with her exceptional social skills, was already on casual speaking terms with Atila and was engaged in active conversation. Atila didn’t seem to find Elia’s presence overly burdensome and responded quite eagerly.

“Think about the length. Generally, in a fight between a sword and a spear, the spear’s advantage is obvious.”

“To a superhuman, what difference does such a length make? Ah, it’s just enough to fold. Rather, the shorter reach of a sword makes it more convenient to wield and thus advantageous.”

“Odd thing for someone who lost by a hair’s breadth last time to say…”

“Shut it.”

Nam Yeon-jung and Aidan were debating which was superior, the spear or the sword. I remember seeing similar arguments online. Endless debates about the

effectiveness of swords versus spears.

On Earth, the conclusion usually leaned towards ‘spear has the advantage,’ but could it be different here?

Looked at from a certain perspective, everyone else seemed to be paired off in conversation, which made me look like the odd one out, but occasionally, I too engaged in the conversation.

Nonetheless, my participation rate was low, so I quietly devoured the pound cake and chewed on a chocolate bar.

“…May I ask you something, Hayul?”

It was around that time when Atila spoke to me. During a pause in her chat with Elia, she had glanced over here a few times before asking.

[Yes?]

“Your special admission. Honestly, I’ve been a bit curious.”

The term ‘special admission’ piqued everyone’s interest. I tilted my head, and Atila scratched her head for a moment.

“It’s not about anything specific. I’m just curious how it happened. Precisely, I suppose… I’m curious about the selection process…”

“Definitely.”

Atila smiled awkwardly, as if she felt embarrassed, and Nam Yeon-jung chimed in.

“It couldn’t have been like regular admissions with exams, nor like a recommendation admission where you’d have showcased your potential in front of the faculty. I heard it was entirely by the Principal’s will… but that process has not been disclosed.”

Nam Yeon-jung finished with curiosity in his eyes. The others felt the same. Pretending otherwise, they were all curious about the selection process of the special admission.

[I don’t really know myself.]

“You don’t know?”

[Yes.]

But I had nothing more to tell them.

[It all just happened out of the blue. Someone came and gave me the notice, and that’s all there was to it.]

To be precise, I didn’t know either. I did receive the Shio-ram enrollment package, but my enrollment must have been decided even before that.

I have no memory prior to receiving it. In the original story, the narrative starts from within Shio-ram.

I also thought the special admission was a device designed for smooth gameplay for the player, not something with any special significance.

“A notification?”

Nam Yeon-jung blinked as if hearing something strange. The same was true for the others listening.

I bit into my chocolate bar again, lost in thought.

‘Special admission… ’

One of Shio-ram’s admission systems, established by Neriel Claidya, the Principal of The Tower of Growth… but in the original, it was nothing more than a convenience feature for players.

A kind of MacGuffin. Even as the main story progressed, the detailed setting of the special admission was never fully explored.

The special admission students… the same for the Principal who selected the players.

Even as the main story continued, the Principal never showed her face.

Throughout the various iterations, even when the world fell apart, the Owner of The Tower of Growth never revealed herself. Even when Shio-ram was half-destroyed during the 11th iteration, it was the same.

'……'

When thinking about it, there's more.

The Owner of The Tower of Growth never appeared, even while her cradle of ascension, Shio-ram, was being destroyed.

During an iteration where I was destroying the Associations, The Tower of Harmony's owner and The Tower of Space's owner never appeared.

The Tower of Observation's owner and the other hidden tower owner also remained unseen.

Despite their creations being destroyed, those owners did not reveal themselves.

The Tower of Growth.

The Tower of Harmony.

The Tower of Space.

The Tower of Observation.

A hidden tower that remains unknown.

The owners of those 'five towers'. Protagonists who quelled a chaotic era in the past, pillars that maintain the system of the current world.

'I don't know anything for sure.'

An overwhelming sense of unknown. At this moment, worrying about tomorrow's livelihood, what does the secret history of the world matter at all?

My head was a mess.

I sighed lightly and took another bite of the chocolate bar.

Chewing brought back old memories, and it actually tasted quite good.

.

.

.

Lowest-Grade Magic

[Mana Blade Slash]

– Kwag-geuk!

A whirlwind swept through, with leaves dancing in the wind. The released slash cleanly split a large rock, and when it hit the ground, it carved a rather deep scar.

After dinner, I was experimenting with magic a bit away from the base. Our objectives were already fulfilled, and we had plenty of time to spare.

'…What in the world is this?'

I touched the split rock with a dismayed expression. The rock's cleft surfaces were rather smooth.

'Its power has increased.'

The Mana Blade Slash I tested over the weekend was about 0.3 of a Lee Hayul, smaller than a Green Goblin if you consider their height up to my waist.

And the one I recently used in the village was about 2.5 of a Lee Hayul.

The sheer length exceeded twice my height, and it was considerably thicker. Not only had its size changed, but its power surged too.

The current Mana Blade Slash… 1 Lee Hayul? Though less powerful than what transpired in the village, its power had unmistakably intensified from the weekend's slash.

Even if it's the same spell, the power of the magic can vary depending on the caster's

prowess. It's an undeniable fact.

A high-ranking mage's fireball cannot compare to that of an apprentice's fireball.

'Ha… '

Can this situation be applied the same way? With no change in status or level, simply after a day or two, the power had spontaneously increased?

There must be a reason for it. If there's an effect, there has to be a cause. But the problem is that I can't figure out that cause.

'Ah… '

Such a headache…

I clutched my head, which was starting to throb with pain.

'Spatial perception?'

My spatial perception grew after entering the dungeon. It nearly expanded a couple of times over, and the information analysis also became more precise.

Is that affecting the magic? How? To the extent that the power of the magic surges this much?

"Ahem…"

While I was groaning with my head in hands, a cough broke the silence. In the quiet forest, the noise seemed to carry.

The cough caught me off guard and made me turn.

A short distance away. Aidan was watching me with a hesitant look.

Despite being able to keep track of the surroundings with my perception, Aidan had followed me as a precaution for any unexpected situations.

In such a place, it's only natural to move in pairs at the very least.

Ever since we met at the café, Aidan's demeanor has been awkward and hesitant.

Even in the dungeon, he repeatedly tried to approach me with something to say, only to retreat back to silence.

When I stood up to experiment with the magic, he volunteered to accompany me, so I suspected he had something he wanted to discuss.

"…I have something to say."

He started speaking with a nervous look. I nodded for him to continue, and Aidan, as though he made up his mind, spoke with a resolute face.

"I truly apologize for the sparring match last time."

"?"

This was unexpected.

Out of the blue? That's something I didn't anticipate. My head tilted to the side.

"I have always been impulsive and thoughtless… no, I apologize. That was an excuse."

Aidan abruptly stopped in mid-sentence and frowned, then suddenly bowed deeply.

"Blinded by petty jealousy, I rushed into asking for the sparring without considering how it might affect you, Lee Hayul, or what the consequences would be."

I'm really sorry.

I was taken aback by the heartfelt apology given with repeated deep bows.

It was disconcerting to receive such an apology out of the blue, especially for something that didn't warrant it.

I tapped on Aidan's shoulder, who was bowing at a ninety-degree angle, and then tapped on my smartwatch.

[It's okay. There's really nothing to apologize for.]

During the sparring match, Aidan had shown dissatisfaction, but I remembered his doubtfulness about the rightfulness of his actions.

Unless there was clear malice, that level of behavior was trivial.

I gestured for Aidan to stop bowing and started walking back to the base.

Aidan, blinking a few times, cautiously led the way.

– Rustle, rustle

We crossed the now dark and gloomy forest. As I walked aimlessly, Aidan's words echoed in my mind.

– Blinded by petty jealousy…

Jealousy… the emotion of envying others.

'……'

I could somewhat understand Aidan's feelings. I was all too familiar with the sentiment of jealousy.

Questions like why I live like this while others live so well.

Why my life has become like this, and why he is succeeding in what he's doing.

How loathsome life can become when jealousy intensifies.

How miserable the emotion is.

I knew it all too well.

CHAPTER 32
LOWER, NOT HIGHER

Atila, who had been engaging in conversation with Elia, felt a familiar presence approaching from a distance. A glance confirmed Aidan and Lee Hayul cutting through the darkness, heading their way.

Atila narrowed her eyes upon recognizing Aidan's face. The expression on the face of the guy who said he would apologize was somehow odd.

'…Did that guy actually apologize properly?'

Atila and Aidan have known each other for a while. They weren't exactly childhood friends but had built a casual acquaintance by attending the same academy.

Therefore, Atila knew Aidan's character.

Aidan was foolish. Oblivious to his surroundings, he would recklessly dash headfirst into something if he wanted to. The epitome of a simpleton.

To put it mildly, one could say he was a good kid at heart, but that didn't negate the fact that he often acted without thinking things through.

It was because of his personality that he made mistakes, wasn't it?

But that last time, it seemed excessively reckless, bordering on being suicidal. The memory still left her with a chilling disgust.

Special admission student, Lee Hayul.

Her heart sank when Aidan challenged him to a duel.

'Damn it.'

She didn't know much about special admissions. However, she was aware of the circumstances surrounding the much-discussed special admission student.

Hadn't he awakened only about a month ago? It was an awakening so late that it was unheard of. And to top it off, he was blind and mute.

Why challenge such a person to a duel? Fortunately, thanks to Aidan's miserable defeat, the incident was glossed over, or else that fool's life would have become much more problematic.

Even if not much else, he would have surely faced some consequences from Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been coldly observing the situation.

Later, when she grabbed hold of his head asking why he did it, his answer was remarkable.

He was curious. He wanted to see just how special someone had to be to be admitted through special admissions.

A madman. To him, it might have been mere curiosity, but from an external view, it was nothing less than starting a fight… or was it really just a fight?

'Idiot… '

A guy who challenged a blind person to a fight. And after that, lost so miserably…

That was the nickname Aidan had been going by among the friends he had made at Shio-ram.

Idiot…

Atila shook her head repeatedly. Now that she thought about it, maybe it would have been suicide if he had died back then.

* * *

After finishing magic experiments, it was time to go to sleep.

Sleeping in the dungeon. Of course, it wasn't advisable to blissfully sprawl out and sleep together.

Even if it was just a 4th-tier, a dungeon was still a dungeon. Complacency is a shortcut to death, a phrase that Professor Atra had emphasized until they were sick

of hearing it.

“Let’s draw lots to decide the watch duty fairly.”

Having set up one tent each for the men and women, Atila proposed determining the watch duty roster before everyone settled in to sleep.

There were five wooden sticks in a tin can, reportedly marked with numbers at the end.

…I could see them all. Atila seemed not to fully understand the capabilities of my spatial perception.

Out of decency, I reeled in my spatial perception before drawing. I heard that the first and last duties were the most comfortable?

“Yes! First duty.”

“Damn it.”

The order was set.

Aidan, me, Atila, Elia, Nam Yeon-jung in that sequence.

Aidan, who drew first duty, clenched his fist in delight, while Atila beside him cursed softly upon seeing the stick marked with the number three.

After some time, Aidan, on first duty, took a seat near the heating magic device, while the rest of us headed into the tents for sleep.

I did the same. Although I had to wake up shortly, I still went into the tent to catch a bit of sleep.

And sleep did not come. My mind was ridiculously alert. The improved spatial perception let me sense even the rustling of leaves in the wind.

‘Ah.’

I intuitively knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep.

.

.

.

“Hayul. It’s time for me to switch with you.”

[Yes.]

In the end, I hadn’t fallen asleep by the time Aidan came to switch duties and opened the tent.

I wriggled out of my sleeping bag. Annoying tiredness clung to my body.

“No issues here. Take care.”

[Yes.]

Aidan had been on informal speaking terms with me.

When he apologized, or when he would occasionally talk to me during dungeon navigation, his manner seemed oddly unfitting, so after his apology, I simply told him to talk to me more comfortably.

Since I can’t speak, I didn’t really see the need.

Even if I could speak, I probably wouldn’t drop formalities.

Something I’ve learned is that there’s no one in this world who I should address informally. It’s less hassle and better for my conduct to simply respond with honorifics.

I sat down beside the heating magic device.

The magic device, casting its light in the center, and the foldable chairs beside it, with the green tent set up nearby.

It all felt like the definition of camping.

Staring at flames or something. There's a culture of idly watching firewood burn, though the object placed in the center here was an egg-shaped magic device, not wood.

A cool night breeze flitted across my skin. Even with my Shio-ram uniform and a robe on top, the chill penetrated through.

'Urgh… '

Cold. The coldness. It was the thing I hated most in the world. I liked feeling cool but detested being cold.

I shuddered and rummaged through my bag, brought from the tent. I took out another heating magic device identical to the one in the middle.

– Click.

Upon pressing the button, its grey surface warmed up to a soft orange hue. I hugged the heating device, relieved by the warmth that began to spread.

'Oh… '

Its size was smaller than my torso, making it perfect to embrace, and its egg-like shape made it suitable for hugging. The temperature was also adjustable, ensuring it wasn't too hot but just right.

I flipped the robe in front to cover my body. The warm heat got trapped inside the robe, warming the air.

As I settled in, my body's trembling lessened. Pulling the hood attached to the robe over my head was just the finishing touch.

I couldn't help but let out a sigh of appreciation. It felt like snuggling into a heated floor under a blanket in the middle of winter.

'Phew… '

I was no longer cold. I rested my chin on the egg-shaped magic device. The drowsy sensation made me exhale deeply.

Sleep didn't come… but it wasn't uncomfortable either. Like this, I could bide my time until it was okay to go back inside.

– Blinded by petty jealousy…

"……"

Perhaps because my nerves were relaxed, that memory kept resurfacing. I narrowed my eyes. Jealousy was an emotion I did not wish to remember.

Back in my parents' house, when I was a child.

The house was my world. My parents were gods who created me, while the thugs who occasionally came to terrorize were external enemies.

Those parents of mine were no parents at all. They were biological parents, capable of reproduction and birthing offspring.

But morally speaking, they were garbage.

I didn't know that as a child. My world was the home. Everyone around me was the same. Everyone was violent, and they maltreated me. The neighborhood was constantly filled with the sounds of shouting and crying.

So, I believed that was the norm.

I thought my parents were normal, and I was the abnormal one. It was unjust and painful when my parents hit me, but I had no choice but to accept it.

My parents couldn't control their anger and hit their child, dragged me by the hair, threw beer bottles, and kicked when they were upset.

All of that seemed normal to me.

After a fire took my parents' lives, I wandered through the slums. Looking back, it's a wonder I didn't die back then.

I was wandering when some people found me and took me to an orphanage.

There, I still didn't understand the standard of normalcy. The other children didn't

have parents like me. Most had been abused by their parents.

They were like me. So, I thought everyone was like me.

Somehow.

I had once been to the city center. I don't clearly remember why.

There were people. Like me. They had two legs. No burns, and two arms. They had two eyes, unlike my blurred vision.

They were the same as me.

– Hey, going for second round?

– I'm in if we split the bill.

– Don't you remember chowing down on beef last time?

They were different. There was no exchange of shouts and screams. No sad sobbing could be heard. Swearing was occasionally overheard, but it carried whimsy and friendliness, unlike the negative emotions from parents.

– Daddy! That! That's what I told you about!

– Yeah, yeah. I got it. But we need to go slow, okay?

– Hurry up!

They were unlike me. An apparent child pulled their parent by the hand. Instead of unleashing a fist in anger, the parent coaxed the child and walked together.

I stood staring blankly at such a street scene for a while. It was snowing that day. Maybe it was Christmas? Or maybe Christmas Eve.

As I stood there with snow piling up on my head, an adult approached and asked if I had lost my way.

After shaking my head no, I remember trudging back to the orphanage.

That was when it started.

Everything felt unsatisfactory. I found fault with all things. It all felt unfair. I always had complaints, but they weren't as intense as they were then.

Because this was deemed normal. Everyone was unhappy. Everyone was like me. The other kids at the orphanage also lacked parents and were abused. Poor and starving, it was the norm.

But that wasn't the case. Not everyone was like that. Many people were similar to me, but even more were happier than me.

My parents and the parent being led by the child that day were different.

– What's different?

Jealousy.

– Why are they different? Why does that kid deserve better?

Envy, resenting others, coveting what they have.

– What did I do wrong?

It was an unfavorable emotion. Envy brought only more misery to me. Why were they happy, and I was not? That child beamed with joy; why was I left in such a state?

It was pitiful. Envy brought nothing. The more I compared myself to others, the more pitiable I felt.

It felt miserable. Unwanted and for no reason other than being unfortunately born, my circumstances were so vastly different that I didn't want to live. Everything seemed meaningless.

But I was too much of a coward to end up like my burnt parents.

I felt if I continued to harbor jealousy, I might really end up killing myself.

I wasn't the kind of person who could transform jealousy into a positive drive.

So I didn't look up. I had no confidence in climbing higher. I didn't look at people who were better off or happier than me.

I looked down. People who were less fortunate… more precisely, those who were unhappier than me.

Looking closely, there were as many people happier than me as there were those who were unhappier.

Disgustingly, I found solace there. At least I'm not the worst, and I'm relatively happy, I thought with a revolting sense of relief.

'……'

I was a vile and disgusting person. Every so often, I wondered if there was a reason my parents treated me that way.

Hugging the magic device tightly, my breath was minutely short, but I felt emotionally stable. I hunched quietly and adjusted the robe, just in case someone saw.

The duel with Aidan wasn't unpleasant. The apology just now wasn't unpleasant. I never thought it warranted an apology.

But because the apology touched on jealousy, an uncomfortable emotion emerged.

It was as though I had to apologize for the apology I received.

The few hours of guard duty felt unbearably long.

* * *

"Come on! Chug it down! Eh? Aigoo, aigoo? Can't even do a one-shot with such a small glass? Disappointing~ Your actions are small-hearted compared to your bravado! Heh."

Heh heh heh heh.

Whatever was so funny, Liana banged on the table. The liquor in the glasses jostled. The scene was the very picture of an incorrigible drunk.

Near the glass filled with alcohol were a plethora of empty bottles stolen of their contents.

The room was filled with an overpowering, nose-tingling scent of alcohol.

“Haah…”

Atra should have just ignored it. She shouldn’t have agreed, even with the thought of just letting herself lose once.

Atra regretted it too late.

CHAPTER 33
DROWNING IN DRINK

Liana is fond of drinking. However, she isn't one to get drunk easily. As a result, she ends up drinking large amounts to reach a state of inebriation.

It wouldn't be accurate to label her as an alcohol addict, but it is true that she enjoys her drinks.

Furthermore, as one of the top class heroes, the fortune she amassed over the years at the African front is staggering.

Such that even after splurging on millions worth of drinks, it hardly makes a dent in her bank account.

"Ha ha ha…!"

That's why incidents of her drinking excessively and becoming half-drunk occur.

Her face is flushed red. Her complexion loudly announces 'I have been drinking' as if it were written in big letters.

And the corners of her mouth are playfully turned up. Despite usually maintaining a pleasant smile for the sake of her image, right now, she seems preoccupied with giggling away.

"Here, have a drink! Wearysila's Droplets, this one is in my top 10 favorite liquors!"

Liana offered a glass containing a blue liquid to the side. There Atra sat, soothing her insides by sipping warm milk with a greenish complexion.

"No thanks. You drink it."

"Aww, came all this way to drink just a few glasses then stop? No matter how weak to alcohol our Atra is, that's a bit…"

“Just shut up and drink it yourself.”

Liana let out a quiet laugh at the rather curt response. Perhaps she found it ridiculous how she always paraded around with a kind expression for image management?

‘Keek, how pathetic.’

Even if Atra pretends otherwise, her expression is flushed too. Always prancing around with raised eyebrows acting superior, Atra is weak to alcohol.

There’s proof in how her manner of speech has changed.

‘No’, ‘Yes’, ‘I don’t want to’ – her usually stiff and formal tone has given way to much more ordinary speech.

Meaning, her true feelings are beginning to show. It was intentional. Atra is so guarded that unless she’s drunk, she’ll just wear a strange mask and repeat formal answers like a parrot.

“Student Lee Hayul, aren’t you being a little too harsh on him?”

Now that the mood was ripe, Liana delved into the heart of the matter. Atra’s hand abruptly stopped.

“You could be a little kinder to him, couldn’t you? Do you have to press him so hard?”

“Don’t talk nonsense.”

Atra frowned deeply, slamming the glass containing warmed milk onto the table with a thud.

“Kinder? Pressuring? Hell, do I have the luxury to do that?”

“Hmm…”

Liana looked taken aback. She had merely meant to prod a little before getting to the main point, but Atra’s reaction was quite vehement.

Rolling her eyes, Liana began to speak.

"…I know the situation isn't all that rosy."

Lee Hayul is a special admissions student. The first of his kind in Shio-ram, without precedent.

If you ask about the origins of the current top-ranking heroes, eight or nine out of ten are from the cradle, Shio-ram.

The blessing of growth granted there is monstrous, and Shio-ram is unparalleled as an institution for breeding superhumans.

There being no equal, Shio-ram yearns for diverse human resources. It's a sort of virtuous cycle.

For such a place, Lee Hayul is a first.

It draws attention. Naturally.

The problem is not all of this attention is benevolent.

"The Principal, this crazy bastard. What the hell is he thinking…"

Atra clasped her throbbing head. The thought of it alone made her dizzy.

Positive attention… what level of potential did he have for the Principal to admit him with special admissions? Could he be brought over to our faction later? It would be nice if he could participate in the future purification operation of Mara…

Negative attention… what level of potential did he have for the Principal to admit him with special admissions?

Let's nip the bud early.

Even after the great cataclysm 200 years ago, there have been countless changes in the world, but humanity as a species – emotions and desires – have immutable aspects.

In short, there are always bastards beyond common moral judgment regardless of place or time.

Atra had received help from the previous Principal in the past. Although it wasn't exactly a salvation for her life, it was enough to be considered a debt.

Of course, even that help was only through the Vice-Principal.

Anyway, using that debt as grounds, the Principal requested that Atra take responsibility for teaching the special admissions student.

The problem is that there's been nothing further to say since then. That was the end of it. Suddenly, the Vice-Principal shows up in an internal Shio-ram meeting saying 'we've selected a special admissions student' but there was no follow-up.

"Damn it. Shouldn't there be more measures?"

Just bringing him over, and that's it?

Shouldn't there be something like 'we selected him for this reason as a special admission student. He's a student I brought in, so please look after him. Educate him well from now on. He's under my protection, so you'll be in trouble if you cross him'…and so on?

Why are there no further measures? The lack of proper action caused Atra a great deal of stress and confusion.

Everyone knows that the Principal has virtually stopped being active for the past few decades. The Vice-Principal is the one who handles activities within Shio-ram.

According to the Vice-Principal, the final decisions rest with the Principal, and all he does is follow those decisions, but the Principal hasn't been seen in public, formal or informal, for decades.

After so many years of silence, they broke it. The Vice-Principal directly mentioned 'a decision made by the Principal after deep contemplation.' And so, they selected the special admissions student.

End.

This delicate handling made people harbor various suspicions.

It also attracts unfortunate interest.

Within Shio-ram, it's fine. The Tower of Growth is here, and although silent, the Principal is still present.

Shio-ram, which has existed for over a hundred and twenty years, has never allowed a single invasion or let its students be harmed.

"Damn it…"

But what about outside? The Principal's protection does not extend beyond our walls. Cases have proven it. Outside the cradle lies a harsh reality. There is nothing to be done about unfavorable events happening outside.

If Lee Hayul is alone and cannot solve a problem for himself outside, it's the end.

You can't keep protecting him forever. It's not feasible to stick with him for life.

Assign a guard? What level of guard, and can that guard truly protect him in all circumstances? If Hayul doesn't overcome a crisis beyond the guard's ability, when danger looms over his throat…

Gritting her teeth, Atra became overwhelmed with emotion, as if ignited with fire.

– Stop worrying! It's not like we're going alone, but in a party! You're too concerned! Am I that worthless to you?

An annoying memory resurfaced. It always happened when with Lee Hayul.

That's why she aimed to rapidly enhance his power. At least to the extent that he could protect himself if misfortune struck.

From the second day on, she had him hold a weapon and sparred with him. From the perspective of an active superhuman, it wasn't particularly harsh.

Still, she knew it was a demanding schedule for Lee Hayul, who had only recently awakened and was still a freshman.

Typically, you elevate the basic physical level first. Jamming techniques into a weak body is exceedingly inefficient.

You bring the body up to the standards of a superhuman first, then teach skills

appropriate for a superhuman.

But Lee Hayul was different.

The basic blessing of growth provided, the amplified performance due to the special admissions, the steep curve of growth from a recent awakening, the absorbing capacity for lecture materials that was almost suspicious.

Based on her rough assessment, Lee Hayul had the potential to handle the schedule. He could simultaneously improve his physical level and his skills. As time went by, she was more and more certain of this.

"Ugh…"

Liana intermittently waved away the waves of Atra's grumbling. The reaction was more intense than she imagined. It seemed Atra had quite a lot of pent-up frustrations.

Liana knew a bit about Atra's past too.

She once had a disciple. They met by chance. At that time, Atra was a high-ranking hero, and the disciple was just a normal academy student.

Despite being prickly, Atra had a soft heart. She's the type who doesn't stand out much because of her physical weakness, like someone strong outwardly but gentle at heart.

And she once gave that disciple all her earnest affection. As her first disciple, she tried to teach as much as possible even though her methods were unskilled.

The disciple, aware of that dedication, followed Atra like an elder sister, bonding like a family.

—She had a disciple. Now she doesn't.

"I don't know what the Principal is thinking, but you're right – we need to get stronger as quickly as possible. If we get complacent because we think there's time, it may be irreversible."

The political situation had been strange nowadays. The number of monsters

emerging from Mara had been steadily increasing. Villains escaping into Mara and causing havoc worldwide were also on the rise. While not yet prominent, the frequency of dungeon formations has been gradually increasing too.

It feels as though a significant event will happen soon. That's the mood going around these days.

"…and during such times, it makes no sense to be at leisure…"

Atra sprawled her body onto the table as she muttered, her voice slurred as if the alcohol had suddenly hit her.

"I get it. The situation is tough, so get stronger quickly, I get that… but you can still say kind words, can't you?"

Atra might not have been entirely coherent, but she said what needed to be said.

"If you carry on like this, student Lee Hayul might end up resenting you. That's not good for either of you, right? Wouldn't it be better to just explain the situation?"

Liana patted Atra's back as she spoke, but Atra shook her head.

Resentment? What an absurd notion. For Atra, it might have been for the better.

No more disciples ever again. Her current education duties were only temporary due to the Principal's request.

She'd only teach Lee Hayul enough so he wouldn't end up swept away and perish senselessly. After that, it was none of her concern.

"It doesn't matter. Let him resent me. That's actually better…"

Watching Atra, broken-record-like in her repetition, Liana sighed deeply.

'What a mess.'

She understood the sentiment. Atra didn't want to get emotionally attached. She disliked the idea of becoming close due to past wounds, yet she couldn't stand the thought of Lee Hayul getting hurt in some trouble.

The situation being what it was, it's best to drive him hard to grow as fast as possible. Being treated harshly, naturally, the resentment would be directed at her, which, in her mind, was preferable.

"Better to be resented than to die…"

'So stubborn… '

There was no answer to this. At least for Liana, there seemed no further room to press.

She sighed heavily once more.

* * *

The next day.

Waking up late in the morning, Atra opened the curtains to the sunlight and spoke.

"Damn…"

It's difficult for a superhuman of the highest category to get drunk. Though there are liquors suited for superhumans, for someone whose body has evolved to the extreme like Atra, getting drunk is tough.

If she willingly accepts the sensation of intoxication, she can indeed get drunk. That's what happened yesterday. Somehow, her emotions became heightened, and she fully gave in to the drunkenness.

It happens that you may drink too much and lose the memory of the night before. Not so with Atra. Yesterday's memories are vividly recalled.

What a shitty morning. Like spitting out bile, Atra stood up, her mood tainted.

Atra lived in housing within the Shio-ram premises. She wasn't the only one; most professors did so.

As she straightened out her attire, the scent of alcohol that had seeped into her clothing and even her skin deeply furrowed her brow. Just how much had she imbibed the night before…

Stepping out onto the balcony connected to her second-floor bedroom, she took a deep breath. The crisp morning air filled her lungs.

But the memories of the previous day soiled her mood once again.

– Sszztt.

“Phew…”

As a result, she reached for a cigarette she hadn’t touched in a while. She would always have one in her mouth on the front, but she’d grown so sick of it that she had chucked them aside.

Now a spontaneous urge made her pick it up. She plucked out a cigarette, ignited it with a flick of her fingers, and inhaled the coarse yet refreshing smoke.

It was a blend known for its excellent calming effects, a go-to product for Atra.

Suddenly recalling the date, she checked her smartwatch.

[Tuesday AM 10:32]

Tuesday. The day when the freshmen return from the dungeon practice.

“……”

Atra looked at the time with a complex expression. Starting tomorrow, she needed to resume Lee Hayul’s training.

Dressed in casual clothes, she left the house. The gloomy mood motivated her to get her body moving.

At an appropriate pace… given her physical capabilities, she traversed the premises rapidly. It wasn’t long before the training facilities came into view in the distance.

As well as a small male student near them.

‘Ah.’

The Shio-ram uniform with a robe thrown over it. A large backpack was strapped to

his back, with two daggers and several pouches hung around his waist.

It was equipment provided by Atra. Though The Tower of Growth may not be aware, it's permissible to carry such equipment for dungeon practices.

And the magic wand hanging alongside the backpack looked almost comical. Yet due to its owner's appearance, it seemed more charming than ridiculous.

He must have just come out of the dungeon.

"……"

With a complex look, Atra stepped forward. Her destination was the training facility behind Lee Hayul.

She considered turning back for a moment, but since he was already right at the entrance, and it felt silly to detour, she continued straight on.

– Trudge trudge.

Suddenly, Lee Hayul turned sharply in her direction. This reaction made Atra narrow her eyes slightly.

'The distance… '

It had increased. Nearly 300 meters remained between them. Yet, he sensed her presence. Even against her, who always minimizes her own presence.

'…Has his perception improved?'

The speed of his growth was steep. On the first day of class, he wouldn't notice her until she was right up close. Now, from this distance, he was immediately aware.

She hadn't reduced her presence as much as that time, but nonetheless, it was a remarkable development.

While it was heartening, it stirred an indescribable feeling.

The distance closed.

Lee Hayul approached too, seemingly intending to exchange greetings now that they had met.

“Have you finished with all your schedules?”

Atra initiated conversation as a matter of form. With such a reduced distance, Lee Hayul began to manipulate his smartwatch.

Actually, he tried to. The hand set to move stopped. His stepping feet halted.

“Hmm?”

Lee Hayul stood frozen, not showing any sign of movement. After a moment, his head tilted. His response suggested something puzzled him.

– Sniff sniff.

Lee Hayul’s nose twitched. At that instant, his body jerked once.

‘What’s that?’

The reaction was puzzling.

However, it was far from as violent as his subsequent actions.

Lee Hayul had not protested against the harsh training.

He hadn’t asked why. He had never inquired why such a schedule was set up. He hadn’t shown any resentment towards the cold and rigid Atra.

Even when Atra absentmindedly forgot to bring him water due to being preoccupied, he showed no signs of sulking.

Even when there was an occasion provoking a blunt query, he simply followed her instructions dutifully, as if trusting in Atra.

That Lee Hayul.

“Ugh…”

He grimaced in every way possible, stepping back. Overt disgust passed over his face. His withdrawal had the appearance of someone distancing themselves from repulsion.

– Thump!

"……"

It was a dizzying sensation, like a heavy boulder slamming down.

Atra's eyes trembled tremulously.

CHAPTER 34
I DISLIKE THE PROFESSOR (1)

“Lee Hayul, did you have an uncomfortable sleep last night?”

“?”

“You seem very tired.”

I ended up not sleeping at all last night. After spending the entire night with my eyes wide open, I had to welcome the morning. Consequently, my condition remained below par.

I roused myself with some difficulty and prepared to depart with my group members.

It didn’t take long to pack up. The equipment was expensive but designed for convenience and performance, which made pack-up a breeze.

At the temporary base where most of the packing was complete,

We gathered in the center and took care of breakfast in a simplistic manner. It was just like yesterday, reheating convenience food, but perhaps knowing we would soon be leaving the dungeon made everyone’s faces brighter.

In the midst of our journey back,

Elia, who had looked at me with a tilted head from morning as if examining me, asked a question. Apparently, I looked pale from the outside.

[I’m fine. I just couldn’t sleep well, that’s all.]

It was no lie. Whether it was due to nerves or something else, I just couldn’t catch any sleep and ended up seeing the night through.

Of course, that wasn’t the only reason.

'…Ugh.'

When it was time for my night watch duty, Aidan apologized amid a rant about jealousy, which led me to soak in unnecessary thoughts and sulk alone.

It made me reminisce about the past unnecessarily. I silently vented my frustration on innocent Aidan, even resorting to self-loathing to pass the time.

After switching with Atila for the next watch, I crawled back into my sleeping bag. As my head cooled down, I realized the silliness of my thoughts.

Or perhaps it was the dawn emotions. Feeling slightly ashamed, as if I had been digging my own tunnel, intoxicated by the warmth of the magical heating device, similar to a bonfire, and the camping ambiance of the base.

It was a greater embarrassment than the night before I became possessed when I alone floundered with my arms slumped on a desk.

Thankfully, I kept those thoughts to myself. It ended there, with the dark history of the dawn known only to me.

If someone else had caught wind and it had spread, I might have ended up hanging myself.

"Make sure you get plenty of rest and take some supplements when you return to the dormitory, Hayul."

[Yes, thank you.]

Did I look like I was about to die? I took in Elia's worried eyes and her advice to take care of my health.

As I made my way lighter-footed across the forest compared to yesterday, I occasionally launched forceful magic strikes against any monsters I came across.

A quadrupedal beast-type monster. It was of the 8th-tier. The distance was about 40 meters. However, trees densely packed between made it impossible to see each other with the naked eye.

Lowest-Level Magic

[Mana Strike]

The diagonally launched slash easily sliced through the trees and struck the monster. Its waist severed cleanly, the monster split into two pieces and fell.

Guts split and blood red spilled onto the floor, leaves soaking in the scarlet made for a grotesque scene.

'Hmm… '

I fidgeted with my hands, feeling unsure. I had tried it out just in case, but the power remained as heightened as yesterday.

What could be the cause? Really because of spatial perception? A factor other than affinity for magic, like spatial perception influencing magic like this?

Or because we're inside the dungeon? And why is that?

'Don't know… '

It seems I'll need to seek advice from Professor Liana after leaving the dungeon. My knowledge of magic is too meager to make decisions on my own.

Right now, the amount of my magic power is very minor compared to other students. As for manipulation… according to Professor Liana, it's considered excellent, and my magical affinity is apparently doing its job.

Still, I've only been introduced to magic at best two weeks ago.

When compared to students who have trained in magic, their core, and circuits for many years, and those who feasted on elixirs, I am at a disadvantage.

Even now, after having cast magic a few times, nearly half of my magic power has been consumed. This is despite even using the staff's magic energy.

'I must also pay attention to my magic power.'

But naturally, the easiest way to increase magic power is with elixirs… however, if elixirs were just lying about on the ground, they wouldn't be called elixirs.

If it was like in the original work, one could just search for various hidden pieces early on, sell them, or even commit outright fraud to amass funds and elixirs.

But here, I have neither the money nor any way to find hidden pieces.

For now, it looks like accumulating little by little in an honest manner, as I did the first time, is my only option.

The entrance to The Tower of Growth is coming up soon. At that time, not only can I potentially resolve some of the magic power issues but also gain a few other benefits.

Plus, if the hidden piece does indeed exist in The Tower of Growth… that's… somewhat concerning.

This isn't a game, so actually taking it poses a different problem. Its very existence is still unknown; pondering over it now is just premature excitement.

Before long, I sensed the blue vortex. It was the hole to the dungeon we entered yesterday for the first time.

"Let's head back."

Atila adjusted her shield and took the lead.

Atila checked for dangers beyond the dungeon first, with Aidan, assigned to rear defense, standing last to guard against any rear surprise attacks.

Her figure was swallowed by the swirling vortex, her presence fading away. Following in turn, we each entered the vortex one by one.

…

…

After a brief bout of nausea and dizziness, spatial perception encompassed the premises of Shio-ram. Thanks to the expanded range and precision, it felt quite different than before.

I breathed in. The dungeon's air was fairly clear as it was a dense forest, but still, the air of Shio-ram was more comfortable.

The tension I had been holding dissolved. Worn out from maintaining alertness in fear of what might happen until the end, I felt worn.

As I was loosening up my stiff body, Atila led the team members straight to the nearby administration facility.

“Ipchun class, section 11… Atila and 4 members exited on Tuesday around 10:46 AM. Your performance will be calculated later. You have all worked hard.”

We registered both face-to-face with the facility manager and in the system.

With the manager’s words, we headed outside the facility.

“Ah, it’s finally over.”

With a groan, Elia raised her arms high and stretched, attracting attention largely due to her prominent chest.

– Clap

Atila, who had been working with her smartwatch, drew attention with a clap. Once she verified that everyone was looking, she smiled and spoke.

“It finished much smoother and quicker than expected. Thank you all for the cooperation. And Lee Hayul, a special thanks to you.”

She added a sudden commendation on top of the formality. When I looked puzzled, Atila smiled mischievously.

“Thanks to Lee Hayul, we were able to save an absurd amount of time on scouting. I was late to say it yesterday, but you might have wandered until dawn otherwise.”

“This extermination uncommonly went by smoothly.”

“That’s right. I’ve never had such an easy experience in a dungeon, despite the little experience I have,” Elia added.

Certainly searching for monsters in a dungeon of that size has many inconveniences.

Some teams might not have someone with a sensory-type unique ability. And even if

they do, at most, there would only be one person making exploration a challenge.

Furthermore, not all sensory types guarantee smooth exploration.

In the original story, even with a poor sensing ability, searching could consume days.

Of course, spatial perception is not merely a simple sensory type ability to be categorized as ordinary. It's in a category akin to a hexagon, and luck also played a part in drastically reducing our time.

[Thank you.]

Caught in the unexpected shower of compliments, it was hard to know how to react. I gave a tentative reply, and Atila, acknowledging with a nod, continued,

"I've been rambling on for a bit. We've built some camaraderie over these two days. And since we're in the same class, let's continue to get along. Who knows when we might need each other's help?"

The gist was about building a network and staying on friendly terms moving forward. Atila made her point while sharing her contact information.

"Well then, let's really disperse and relax now. You've all done a great job."

With that, the practical session really ended.

Atila mentioned she had leftover fatigue and headed back to the dormitory to rest.

Aidan and Nam Yeon-jung walked off in the same direction. They talked about renting the training ground for a battle, a continuation of yesterday's discussion about sword versus spear.

"Do you have any separate plans, Hayul?"

Elia, who was checking her reconnected smartwatch, looked up at me and asked. I nodded as I checked for any missed messages from the past days.

[I plan to visit the library. There's still much I'm curious about and issues with magic remaining.]

“Ah… certainly,” Elia responded.

It wasn’t just the forceful magic strike. I tested other spells in the dungeon and, for the most part, their output had increased. It was a mystery.

That alone made it a reason to visit the library to peruse materials. Even if I don’t find anything out, it’s of no consequence. Any study is beneficial, and if I can’t figure it out on my own, I’ll go see Professor Liana.

“I’ll be going as well. When you get back to the dormitory, be sure to take your supplements and get a good rest! I’ll see you in the classroom tomorrow!”

[Yes, thank you.]

I parted company with Elia, who again showed concern as if I was a child, which left me feeling slightly awkward.

As Elia finally waved and vanished from my spatial perception range,

I confirmed her absence and moved on.

My intended destination was the library. Though my mind was tired, I wasn’t so exhausted as to collapse.

Moreover, lingering unease remained, and finding a lead on the increased potency of my magic would allow me to sleep more peacefully.

‘Oh.’

As I took a step forward, my spatial perception caught a familiar figure.

Golden hair down to the shoulders, long legs that reduced distances with each stride.

It was Atra, the professor.

Her frown indicated that something might have displeased her.

My refined spatial perception now let me feel the magic inside Professor Atra more acutely than before.

The lethally fierce, shining magic power seemed ready to tear apart anything around her, yet it stayed concealed like a predator lying in wait, at times making me sweat coldly.

Professor Atra's gaze locked onto me, too. Even from hundreds of meters away, she pinned me with a precise look.

I turned and walked towards Professor Atra. Eye contact had been… um… made, after all, so I should at least greet her.

While various factors made the schedule easier, the foundation of it was largely due to the knowledge and equipment that Professor Atra had drilled into me.

I intended to thank her, expressing my gratitude for the operation's smooth progress thanks to her help.

"Is your schedule all completed?"

As the gap between us narrowed, Professor Atra inquired. Her tone didn't suggest anger, a relief. I managed my smartwatch as I thought.

Displeased.

"?"

Suddenly, that word crossed my mind—an unexpected thought that burst out of nowhere. Displeased? Why? With Professor Atra? Such strange thoughts.

My head tilted unconsciously. My hands weren't moving, and neither were my legs. My body seemed to have frozen up.

'What's the matter?'

Something was wrong with my body. A ring of tinnitus resounded in my ears—an alarming experience.

Filthy?

I couldn't understand why such thoughts were emerging.

I did not think of Atra, the professor, that way. The training was harsh, but fruitful. I didn't see her tough approach as deliberate harassment and had faith in her.

In the dungeon, Atra's methods of survival seemed somewhat awkward at times but showed that, at the very least, she didn't want me to die.

In any event, Professor Atra was earnestly educating me.

– Sniff sniff

Suddenly, my nose twitched. Due to the curse, It was an organ incapable of smelling.

The morning air's fragrance, the cozy sunlight, the pure scent of grass, the sweet fragrance of blossoms occasionally present,

I couldn't smell them. The curse had taken that away from me.

Disgusting.

Filthy.

Vile and unclean.

I hadn't smelled it. No, that wasn't it.

I realized it instinctively.

The lowly smell I always felt in childhood, something I couldn't dare to explicitly call a scent.

The wretched stench intermingled with magic that my debauched parents, despite having nothing, bought with money and adorned themselves with.

The revolting scent that drove away every last bit of their sanity and intellect.

The detestable presence of my parents.

"Ugh…!"

I stumbled. Regaining my senses, I found myself backpedaling. My shaky legs

desperately widened the distance.

“What… are you okay…?”

My spatial perception swayed uneasily. Professor Atra, looking perplexed, was…

– You should never have been born. Why did something like you have to exist? Damn it…

Professor Atra… approached…

– Like a rat, all you can do is eat and crap. What are you living for, huh?

Professor Atra was…

– You as a child do nothing for your parents. Is it because you’re sickly and withered so you can’t even donate organs? Or should simply be thrown away?

My parents… the knife, it came closer—

“Uh, ugh…!”

In that moment, my guts felt as though they were tearing apart, and my waist buckled. A churning burning inside became unbearable. Unable to contain it, the disgusting contents surged up.

In a panic, I clamped my mouth shut with my hands. My shoulders heaved. It felt like the contents were about to burst from the insufficiently sealed mouth at any second.

“Gah…!”

Spatial perception picked up on a tactile sensation. Magic affinity unpleasantly accepted the contemptuous and ugly magic.

But I realized instinctively.

Before spatial perception detected it, before magic affinity analyzed the magic.

My body had reacted first. As it drew near, my body stiffened, and by instinct, I staggered back.

Even if I withdrew spatial perception, even if the disgusting and filthy magic disappeared,

Unconsciously, in the realm of my instincts. I would continue to feel that presence.

“What’s wrong! Are you, are you alright!?”

Desperate, Atra approached. The vile and repulsive presence rapidly closed in, intensifying the nausea.

‘No, please don’t… ’

“Ah, —ack…”

Unwillingly, my mouth opened, and immediate retaliation followed. A pain as though my throat was tearing apart. Combined with the boiling inside, I couldn’t bear it any longer.

“Gah! Gack! Gack…! Urk…! Ugh, blargh…!”

Vomit refluxed into my throat. Spew burst forth from the unsealed gap.

– Schreee—!

The tinnitus in my ears suddenly intensified. The world was engulfed by one sound. It felt like my head would burst from the pain.

“Calm down! There’s nothing here that could be a threat—”

Suddenly right next to me, Atra reached out her hand. As I saw the slowly approaching hand, I acted reflexively.

– Slash!

With a wide swing, I repelled the approaching threat. It was an essential action taken by life’s instinct without going through reason.

“……”

Atra’s expression crumbled.

CHAPTER 35
I DISLIKE THE PROFESSOR (2)

Hong Yeon-hwa's perception of Lee Hayul rested on viewing him as a fragile child that must be protected, one so perilous that if you took your eyes off him for even a moment, catastrophe might ensue.

His delicate appearance played a part in this. Honestly, those who would get the impression of steadfastness from one glance at Lee Hayul were likely few and far between.

More than that, the persona Lee Hayul had shown while living together had helped to shape that perception.

Although it was her own fault, from the very first encounter when they collided, Lee Hayul had shown a helplessly rolling figure.

And then,

The sight of him clutching her sleeve, hanging his head low and following her closely, curled up in a corner all throughout the freshman welcome party.

And also, also! The scene where he lost consciousness after accidentally bumping into a Japanese student, due to her mistake.

While unconscious, he suffered through a nightmare, groaning in pain to the point where it seemed he could barely breathe,

…and when he was taken into her arms, he slowly calmed down, cuddling and burrowing into her embrace in terror…

After the lectures began,

Always watching his surroundings, choking in the middle of a self-introduction, and not knowing how to react when given candy, expressing gratitude,

And if left alone during lunchtime, he'd be found in some corner munching on something like a chocolate bar.

Then one day he came back after being hit by a certain professor… when she internally thought of revenge, he eerily caught on and clung to her, whining not to do it…

And the cute appearance of him handing her a crumpled piece of candy as if it were repayment, worried whether she would like it or not, and carefully observing her response.

Anyway, because of his past conduct, Hong Yeon-hwa couldn't think of Lee Hayul as anything but an exceedingly fragile entity.

He must be protected.

The sense of guilt mingled with his usual demeanor to craft this perception. Lee Hayul seemed to her like a piece of fine art, delicate and liable to shatter at any moment.

Somewhere along the way, Hong Yeon-hwa came to believe that she simply had to protect him.

"Hmm… Indeed, you assessed that accurately."

However, this notion cracked somewhat after the last duel.

In the tranquil café on a Tuesday morning,

Next to the window with the sunlight streaming in and at a fairly large table where several people could comfortably sit, an especially prime spot,

Hong Yeon-hwa, along with Baek Ahrin and friends who had also finished dungeon exploration early, gathered to chit-chat.

Excluding the unspeakable circumstances, Baek Ahrin listened seriously to Hong Yeon-hwa's story and heavily nodded.

She took a small sip of the Deluxe Chocolate Edition (₩15,900) on the table, wetting her mouth and preparing what to say next.

All eyes, including Hong Yeon-hwa's, were on Baek Ahrin's lips, eagerly anticipating her response.

After a brief silence to gather her thoughts, Baek Ahrin spoke.

"So, what you're saying is that the fairy you thought you had to take care of showed a powerful side, and that got your heart racing?"

"Motherfucker."

"Ahahaha!"

There was a variety of reactions.

The friends listening to the conversation burst into laughter, loud enough to send the café shaking. If not for the noise-canceling magic, they would have been a major disturbance.

Hong Yeon-hwa cursed and clenched her fist. She wanted to tear out the laughing friends' hair as she buried her head in the table.

"Eh, wasn't that it? Never mind then."

Baek Ahrin's nonchalant words followed her wide-eyed response to Hong Yeon-hwa's reaction. Her upturned lips clearly displayed her emotions.

"Why are you swearing? It's possible for people to make mistakes…"

"Quit the bullshit and listen. I—"

"Ahaha! Fairy, fairy…! My sides…"

Hong Yeon-hwa's speech abruptly ceased, along with the ominous twist building in her fist. A cold silence settled around her.

"…Yeon-hwa?"

Shin Seo-yul, who had practically been choking on laughter, soberly lifted her gaze. She saw Hong Yeon-hwa's face, heavy and troubled.

She wasn't grinding her teeth, nor was she clenching her fists or contorting her face.

– Woosh

Instead, flames erupted.

…

"Aww, come on! But the conclusion's pretty much the same, right?"

"You wanna get hit more? Bring me that damn face, bitch."

"No no! It's not a joke, listen for real!"

Shin Seo-yul desperately waved her head, a lump seemingly hanging there, her physical abilities explosively increased by the crisis of life, to the point of leaving afterimages.

Hong Yeon-hwa crossed her arms and tilted her head, a gesture signaling she might be willing to listen. Shin Seo-yul exhaled in relief.

"Let's recap. Yeon-hwa, you made several—huge!—mistakes on your first day with Lee Hayul, right?"

"Gah…"

The cruel truth stabbed her under the ribs. Wounded deeply, Hong Yeon-hwa grasped at her chest and bowed her head.

"Let's skip the unspeakable atrocious deeds you did to him, but through those instances, Lee Hayul revealed a helplessly fragile side to you, and you let that perception root deep inside—That's what you meant."

Shin Seo-yul paused to sip her drink, savoring the sweet fruit flavor that filled her mouth, then continued.

"People say the first impression is crucial. For you, Yeon-hwa, Lee Hayul's first impression was 'I'm sorry, fragile, must be protected,' and you were smitten at first sight."

“What bullshit are y—”

“But with that mindset, as you lived and took classes together, that impression deeply entrenched itself even further. And then!”

Thump! As she continued, Shin Seo-yul suddenly bulged her eyes out and slammed the table, enough to make even Hong Yeon-hwa flinch.

“Through the recent duel of great interest, the perception was shaken. The Lee Hayul you thought you had to protect actually had incredible hidden strengths… And!”

She hadn’t finished her point. Caught up in her own excitement, Shin Seo-yul bubbled with fervor, rendering Hong Yeon-hwa’s expression mildly sour.

“It means that the young man who seemed fragile and cute turned out to have such abilities, a reversal of charm that shook your heart, Hong! What do you think? How about this deduction by the great Shin Seo-yul?”

“Wahhhh.”

Baek Ahrin, who had been listening with interest, applauded enthusiastically. The other friends joined, slapping their flippers in applause.

“Hmm! This is it!”

Enjoying her own praise, Shin Seo-yul’s shoulders rose with skyrocketing self-esteem. Conversely, stealing a glance at Hong Yeon-hwa, just in case.

Though mixed with seriousness, it was a statement made in jest. Naturally, she expected Hong Yeon-hwa to retort with a call to stop spouting nonsense.

“?”

However, contrary to expectations, Hong Yeon-hwa propped her chin on her hand-knuckle and fell deep in contemplation.

‘…First impression.’

Regardless of the puzzled looks she received, Hong Yeon-hwa was lost in thought.

She had been intent on pulverizing the bastard who dared to challenge Lee Hayul to a duel. Since Lee Hayul intervened, she held back, but her seething rage did not subside.

During the duel, Lee Hayul's unexpectedly strong performance had taken her aback.

Gone was the frail figure tumbling on the floor; instead, stood a swordsman brimming with potential who precisely predicted and dodged and parried attacks, even mixing in counterattacks.

After that.

He manifested his hardened physique, and then his Qi, even smashing the sword of a fellow student who clumsily attempted hand-to-hand combat with him.

She was speechless at the sight of him holding a sword enveloped in a clear Qi, fragments of broken blades reflecting and scattering light.

Special admission. A student chosen by the Principal herself in an unprecedented move. At some point, Hong Yeon-hwa had completely forgotten what that meant.

And then…

Sweat on his face from the intense duel, rough breathing, cheeks flushed beautifully from being overheated…

And that small smile lifting the corners of his mouth, unlike his usual sullen expression, as he looked her way and placed his hand beside his face.

"Umm."

Her face suddenly flushed with heat. Hong Yeon-hwa was typically warm-bodied, but inexplicably, without even manifesting her unique ability, she felt suddenly hot.

She coughed to break her train of thought and picked up a drink from the table. Her throat cooled a little with the cold and sweet beverage, somewhat quenching the heat.

"Wow… really intense."

Ignoring the exasperated voices around her, she recalled a concern that had been nagging at her.

'Hayul… had low magic power.'

Both hardened physique and Qi. The proficiency to use them freely during the duel was surprising, but this meant a less noticed detail.

She remembered the Qi flickering inconsistently, on the verge of dispersing, right after breaking the opponent's sword. Not just a lack of manipulation skill, but a phenomenon of lack of magic fuel… magic power.

Lee Hayul hadn't been introduced to magic for very long. Counting from his awakening, it had been barely a month. His magic power must be scraping the bottom.

'Compensation.'

Mistakes committed from the day of the welcome party until now. She spouted about making amends somehow but had yet to properly compensate.

At best, she had handed him candy or occasionally paid for a meal.

Now it came to her. What was currently lacking for Lee Hayul, the perfect thing for him, something he would surely appreciate.

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes twinkled with anticipation, thinking she could at last offer him a bit of compensation.

And potentially, she harbored the hope of seeing that previous smile once again.

…

A moment later.

"What the fuck?"

The news struck like a sledgehammer that Lee Hayul had vomited and collapsed on the street.

The imaginations of a joyous Hong Yeon-hwa crumbled spectacularly.

* * *

Liana blinked her eyes.

Just yesterday dawn. After dumping a drunk stupid Atra back in her quarters, she returned home.

Pondering over how to persuade the stubborn Atra, she retired to bed a bit later than usual and woke up tardy.

She had a late breakfast and then sat down orderly in the attached yard, engaging in leisurely magic training.

These had become her regularly peaceful and mundane days recently. She would probably have skipped or haphazardly had lunch, prepared for tomorrow's lecture, and taken up some personal research before falling asleep.

Such would have been the case if not for the call about Lee Hayul spraying vomit and collapsing in the middle of the street.

Shaking off the paralysis of her thoughts, she rushed pell-mell to the infirmary. After smoothing out her disheveled hair, she scanned around the health room.

On the bed lay what seemed like a white caterpillar. More precisely, it was a white blanket rolled up tightly… judging by the feel of it, it was Lee Hayul wrapped up in the blanket.

In her haste, she hadn't heard what exactly had happened.

'…Is there nothing physically wrong?'

She examined him with magic, but nothing seemed amiss. Liana looked puzzled for a moment, then glanced into a corner of the infirmary.

There stood Atra, leaning against the wall. Though her behavior looked similar to usual, her expression was off. It was that of someone who had lost an entire country.

"What happened?"

"…Nothing."

"What do you mean nothing? He vomited and passed out just like that?"

Liana posed the question baffled.

"Come on, tell me honestly. Did you do something weird?"

"I don't know. Just, all of a sudden he… started retching and then…"

"Atra, did this happen right after you met with him?"

Atra stuttered out an answer. Her tangled words made it clear she too was confused.

'What?'

The question deepened.

So, Lee Hayul vomited and fainted upon meeting Atra? Just like that? Any reason why?

'I have no idea… '

This was unexpected. Liana sighed heavily and approached the bed. He must be conscious, he should've heard the recent conversation.

She intended to ask him directly.

There were no abnormalities in the body, according to the resident healer.

But there might be emotional instability. In such cases, one must not provoke Lee Hayul, instead initiating a calm and gentle conversation.

Liana was confident.

She had always treated Lee Hayul kindly and gently, unlike Atra. And Lee Hayul, feeling that kindness, had willingly received her touch without resistance.

More tender than usual, Liana tuned her voice and spoke.

“Student Lee Hayul? May I talk with you for a moment—”

– Rustle

The twist in the blanket grew more intense. After a moment of squirming, a slight distance formed between Lee Hayul and Liana.

“…Huh?”

It was a clear sign of rejection. An unexpected move. Liana’s mouth involuntarily dropped open.

“Do you… dislike me, too?”

– Thump

As if in agreement, the blanket twitched. A second confirmatory sign of rejection, proving it was no coincidence.

Liana’s body stiffened.

CHAPTER 36
I DISLIKE THE PROFESSOR (3)

I dislike alcohol and cigarettes.

Alcohol has the ability to reduce a person, minus their intellect, to no more than an animal. It's a noxious drug that easily overcomes even the minimal lines of decency one might have.

Cigarettes rendered people useless. They already damaged my sensitive nose and throat. It never made sense to me why someone would buy and smoke such trash.

After my childhood had passed, I had to work to survive.

Those were tough times, but not unbearably so.

For me, without much of an education, the only work available was either physical labor or part-time jobs.

But with my frail body, I was turned down from every labor job and just managed to snag a convenience store role.

The most popular items at the convenience store were always alcohol and cigarettes.

I dislike alcohol and cigarettes—seeing them, smelling them, tasting them. I just hate their existence.

But that's just my opinion, based on my own experience.

Others can feel differently. There have always been many who indulge in alcohol and end up causing trouble. And those who puff cigarettes until their dying day.

And beyond that, there were people who drank but remained fine, others who smoked but lived well.

I disliked consuming and even smelling these things and didn't want to see them.

Nevertheless, I didn't impose my thoughts on others. Frankly, unless they were pushing their habits on me, it was none of my concern.

Even if Professor Atra drank and smoked to her heart's content, it wasn't my business to judge.

Of course, I might distance myself from her if the smell irked me, but I wouldn't go out of my way to advise her against her habits.

Even getting a whiff of the smell wouldn't cause me to faint. Although I've had an attack in the past, by now I've only been bothered to the point of feeling uncomfortable.

So, what was that just now?

Tucked away within the blankets, I folded back my spatial perception and thought things through.

As soon as I woke up, I nearly panicked, but once I withdrew my spatial perception and the world darkened, wrapped in the warm, soft blanket, I slowly settled down.

Memories before fainting rushed into my consciousness. After parting with my dungeon party, I encountered Professor Atra on the way to the library.

And… that utterly repugnant memory.

'Ugh… '

My stomach churned, and a familiar ache afflicted my gut, an added unpleasantness. The fortunate thing was that I had nothing left to vomit; it was all emptied out in the middle of the street earlier.

My breath trembled. My body, out of control, shivered on its own.

I curled up, shrunk my frame as much as possible, and pulled the blanket tight to create a comfortable space without gaps.

'Adaptation.'

Being hit hurt. So, I adapted. The next time, it hurt less.

Hearing insults pained my heart, but gradually I adapted and it became bearable.

I could adapt to blurry vision, to my aching arm, to the painful throat that made it difficult to speak.

Even when I was temporarily crippled by a hit-and-run drunk driver, I gradually became accustomed to it over time.

Adaptation.

Life always adapts to its environment. As the environment changes every moment, so must life.

I am no different. Complaining about my situation won't change anything. I need to accept and adapt.

And I need to keep doing so.

"Hu, huh…"

I inhaled. Consciously filled my lungs with air, then slowly exhaled. I repeated this process.

'It's okay.'

The current pain, the stabbing headache, the roiling stomach, the sense of revulsion…

I can adapt to all of them. They're just part of countless adaptations I've already made. Failing to adapt means just that—falling behind. To survive, I must get over this.

As I continued deep breaths, the nauseous sensation subsided. Steeling my resolve, I unraveled the blankets.

"Student Lee Hayul…?"

'Ugh… '

Through the now unraveled cocoon of blankets, Professor Liana's voice reached me.

Despite folding back my spatial perception, my body instinctively recoiled from the lingering past sensations.

'It's okay… '

These things I had already overcome in the past, and although they've inexplicably recurred, couldn't I overcome them again?

Carefully, I expanded my spatial perception again, making sure not to extend it beyond the confines of the infirmary.

First, I saw Professor Liana standing a bit away from the bed, looking at me with a somewhat mysterious expression.

"Are you alright? You seemed unwell just now."

Her voice was laced with concern. Internally sighing with relief, I slowly poked my head out from under the blanket.

I had instinctively recoiled earlier but regretted it. It was rude to show such behavior towards someone expressing concern.

[I'm fine now. I'm sorry about earlier.]

"You don't have to apologize. If you're okay now, that's what matters."

Professor Liana scanned me cautiously, then asked with a delicate tone,

"May I ask what happened just now?"

The question was expected. I tapped thoughtfully on my smartwatch before responding.

[Before that, may I ask you one thing?]

"Of course, anything."

[Did you drink alcohol yesterday?]

Liana's movement halted abruptly. She blinked in surprise and tilted her head,

looking baffled.

"…Drinking? Yes, I did have a drink yesterday… How did you know?"

I paused my typing.

How did I know indeed… What should I answer?

Could I smell it? No, the curse has blocked out my sense of smell.

[I just could.]

"Huh…? Just like that?"

But I did know. My body had reacted, faster than my spatial perception and magic affinity.

Faced with my answer, Liana's face hardened. Then, subtly, she brought her wrist to her nose.

"…Could you smell the alcohol?"

[I didn't smell anything.]

As my nose couldn't perform its function, I hadn't lied. Liana, still looking unconvinced, inspected her surroundings with a stiff expression.

"I took a shower right after getting here…? I, I used a massive amount of cleansing magic…"

[I didn't smell anything.]

A wave of magic swirled around Liana as the cleansing spell was activated. It was a purification magic spell, cast dozens of times, that enveloped her.

I blankly felt it with my spatial perception, then turned my head away. I deliberately avoided the direction I had been trying not to acknowledge.

Straight in front of the bed. There was Professor Atra, leaning against the wall. An indifferent expression, subtly different from usual. I could detect even minor changes

because of my spatial perception.

‘……’

Cold sweat trickled down. Recollections of the moments right before I fainted stormed back.

I had met Professor Atra… and retched right in her face. Involuntarily showing repulsion, I backed away and fainted while a concerned bystander watched.

How foul must the professor have felt? The thought alone was dizzying. What an utter impoliteness. It was behavior sure to sap anyone’s affections…

[I’m truly sorry.]

I stopped typing. What more could I possibly say to apologize? For vomiting right in front of someone?

“That apology is unnecessary.”

While I mulled over my thoughts, her voice reached me. I unwittingly flinched. Was she saying that an apology was not even needed? Truthfully, it was a fair response.

As I peeked to gauge the situation, Professor Atra, who had been closely examining my face, turned away and asked,

“…Are you feeling okay?”

[Yes, I’m fine.]

“Then that’s all that matters. Let me know immediately if anything’s amiss.”

[Yes.]

An unexpected exchange ensued. Puzzled, I took a closer look at Professor Atra. Her expression was abnormal, but there was no sign of displeasure.

‘What’s going on?’

“It’s good that you’re awake. I’ll be going now, but if you need to talk, just contact

me.”

Professor Atra turned to leave. She asked a few things about my condition and then left the health room without fuss, not even asking for the reason behind my earlier behavior.

…What now?

…

…

After casting cleansing magic more than a hundred times, somewhat regaining her composure, Liana explained the situation to me, albeit a bit simplistically.

There were bad memories associated with alcohol and cigarettes, and for some reason, the reaction was more severe this time, although the precise reason was unclear.

“Hmm… Could it be a mental issue then? Do you have the results of a psychological evaluation? Most things would have shown up.”

[What’s that?]

“What?”

[What?]

In the course of our conversation, I learned a few facts. Normally, during the entrance exams, candidates would also undergo a psychological evaluation, which I apparently hadn’t done.

It’s a process designed to identify potential mental issues, but I somehow skipped it and was admitted.

“…Hmm?”

Liana tilted her head in confusion.

“Didn’t I say you had special admission? But even so… to skip such a basic

procedure…? I don't know anymore."

Looking uncharacteristically flustered, Liana ruffled her hair and sighed deeply. It was a sigh filled with complexity.

"Let's do an examination together sometime. It won't hurt to check."

With those words, Liana suddenly checked her smartwatch for the time.

Lunch hour was already passing by.

"What will you do now? You can leave if you want, but would you like to rest a bit?"

[I'll rest for a little before heading back.]

"Okay. I'll go ahead then. If anything comes up, you must contact me immediately, okay?"

After repeating her wishes a few times for me to contact her if anything were to happen, Liana too left the health room.

"……"

Finally alone, I relaxed the tight grip I had on my tension. My body fell backward, the softness embracing me all over.

"Uh, ah…"

I barely contained it. Though I tried not to show it outwardly, inwardly I felt emotions strong enough to make me want to flee right then.

Atra's presence. It still struck me as particularly frightening and loathsome. Liana… while not as much as Atra, I still felt aversion.

'I'm tired… '

It hadn't even been a few hours since I emerged from the dungeon, and here I was in this state. Sighs came easily to me. Curling up, I pulled a pillow close and clutched it tightly.

Covering myself with the blanket was an added bonus.

In this way, I managed to calm down for a while. Perhaps because both Atra and Liana were out of the vicinity, I slowly started to feel better.

'…What to do.'

My initial plan had been to head straight to the library, but now I was in this state. I was mentally exhausted. Walking to the library seemed too much; I felt like I could faint on the way.

But I couldn't afford to just waste time.

The dungeon practice had just finished, but right next week, an even more important event was scheduled.

The Tower of Growth entrance.

In the original work, this was when the Event of Snowblow truly began to unfold. How well I capitalized on this event would shape the trajectory of my growth curve.

I had planned to check on the magic anomaly and dive right into preparations… but now, my schedule had gone awry.

Today was Tuesday, and entrance to the Tower of Growth was next Monday.

At most, six days left. Time was tight.

Likely, other students felt the same, preparing for next week with a mix of worry and anticipation.

But I needed to prepare even more than them because of the tag 'special admission student'.

This time, every freshman would enter the tower.

The issue wasn't everyone's participation.

Competition among students inside the tower would be allowed. Since the tower would essentially render pain minimal and injuries illusionary, they were

encouraged to compete thoroughly.

Here, the ‘special admission’ tag became problematic.

Basically, it was a continuation of Aidan’s previous attitude.

When he apologized, he offered a motive saying he was curious.

A special admission student? What’s so great about you? Who are you, to have entered on special conditions? I don’t really know…

Let’s check it now.

A swarm of students with such thoughts would flood over me.

That’s how it was in the original.

In the first part of the main story, the early game events involved characters with low regards for the player, instigating the sabotage…

If I come out on top here, the growth graph charts upwards. And if I fail… there would be a delay.

And this crucial event is less than a week away.

I heaved sigh after sigh.

I couldn’t do nothing, so I brought up the magic books I had previously downloaded on my smartwatch, in hologram form.

…

…

– Knock knock… Click.

“Hayul, are you okay…?”

‘Ah.’

It wasn’t much after Liana had left when Hong Yeon-hwa came to visit me.

After a cautious knock, her upper body peeked through the slightly opened door.

In her hand, she carried a bag full of magic-infused nutritional supplements.

No feelings of discomfort or aversion arose at the sight of her.

In her twinkling red eyes, an overflow of concern and a warm, cozy aura were palpable.

It was an indescribable, fluffy feeling.

CHAPTER 37
ROOT OF THE PILLAR

Hong Yeon-hwa's upper body peeked through the door gap, showing an awkward smile as she fluttered a bag in her hand. Her gaze, shaking the bag, settled on my face.

Her expression turned serious as her pupils quivered, scanning my face thoroughly. Then, the corners of her mouth began to tremble.

"What's going on… Why does your face look like that?"

'?'

The bag fell limply to the floor with a thud. Hong Yeon-hwa quickly approached, pressing her hands against my cheeks. My lips puffed out, creating a foolish expression.

Hong Yeon-hwa's face was a picture of sheer horror. A shaking voice followed her expression.

"No way… What happened to your face. Half of it looks gone…"

– Gently… Pressing…

With a sorrowful expression, as if she was grieving something deeply, Hong Yeon-hwa kept pressing on my cheeks. The palm of her hands carried a warm body temperature, transferring it to my face.

Before I could even respond, an exclamation slipped from Hong Yeon-hwa as she stood up swiftly. She quickly picked up the bag she had dropped and, rummaging through it, produced something for me.

"Here, take these fatigue recovery and nutritional tonics… They're easy to consume without much fuss. I brought them as a get-well gift, so make sure to take them."

In this world where magic and alchemy exist, nutritional supplements, often exaggerated in advertisements in the original world, really do exist.

Eating them increases concentration, dispels fatigue, and restores vitality… Such medicine is actually produced through alchemy.

While not quite at the level of elixirs, there are many concoctions made from various ingredients that are quite beneficial.

It's likely that a few hours of the free semester included the basics of alchemy.

What Hong Yeon-hwa offered were medicines of that sort. I absentmindedly listened to her explanation and accepted one of the offered bottles.

Examining the brand through spatial perception, I recognized a familiar label and shuddered.

Anímomovígor.

It's a product where the supplies are scarce due to the dedicated work of top alchemists. One thing for sure is that it was outrageously expensive.

At this point in the game, players were not expected to be able to afford such items. My hand trembled as I typed on my smartwatch.

[Isn't all of this quite expensive?]

"Huh? No, no. I only brought the reasonably priced ones so that it wouldn't be a burden for you. It's okay, use them all."

…Really? But it looks like that same high-end brand.

Is it different from the original work? I tilted my head in confusion. Hong Yeon-hwa, who had returned the nutrients to the bag and placed it on a side table by the bed, looked back at me.

"Goodness…"

She took a quick second look at my face, sighed deeply, and reached out her hand again to cradle my cheek.

“What happened that your face has become like this… Huh?”

I wondered what she saw in my complexion that concerned her so much. Through spatial perception, I saw nothing that seemed problematic.

Though my condition had been off lately, and I looked a bit pale, it wasn’t something to worry about.

After getting somewhat of an understanding of my situation, Hong Yeon-hwa’s expression became even more solemn as she fiddled with my cheek.

‘Hmm… ’

My cheek continued to be gently prodded for a while.

It was a hard-to-explain feeling. All I knew for sure is that it wasn’t an unpleasant sensation.

Hong Yeon-hwa, as per the setting, has high body temperature due to her Gop-hwa ability. Her body had developed to be compatible with her fire-like magical energy.

Thanks to this, the warmth carrying over from her palm felt extremely comforting. The soft touch of her hands, which kept kneading and stroking my cheeks, felt pleasant.

Drifting in the gentle motions, I almost felt like I was floating. If only I could keep receiving this care.

“…Ah!”

But the contact vanished. With a somewhat confused look, Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been playing with my cheeks before, exclaimed and swiftly withdrew her hands.

The warmth and the tactile sense was gone. The enveloping hands were removed, and instead, the relatively cooler air infiltrated the space.

My mouth fell open in disappointment. I was enjoying it, so why remove her hands? It felt like something given was taken away.

However, I had not the audacity to ask for more pampering and so I closed my mouth

again.

"*Cough, cough.*"

Feeling awkward, Hong Yeon-hwa cleared her throat a few times and glanced at the time. Lunchtime was already long gone.

She hesitated for a moment before speaking up.

"…Would you like me to stay with you for a bit?"

[I'm fine, really. I was about to leave since I've gotten much better.]

It wasn't a lie. After being pampered by Hong Yeon-hwa, I truly felt much better.

She scanned my face, as if assessing my honesty, then nodded.

…

…

After discharging and walking to the library with Hong Yeon-hwa,

[I can see the road perfectly fine. I don't really need guidance.]

"That's part of it, but I just wanted to go for a walk anyway. It's okay."

I was initially going to refuse, considering it might be a bother to her to guide me, but if it meant a simple walk I found no reason to decline.

It was still too early to sunset, so sunlight was beaming down.

The other teams should also be finishing their dungeon practices soon. I could sense a few students trudging back via my spatial perception.

"…I tried it, and it was pretty good. Most of the menu items were fine too. Let's go there together sometime."

[Sure. I'll look forward to it.]

“Ahrin ordered the Chocolate Deluxe, or something like that, but it was too sweet for my taste. I don’t know how she enjoys things that sweet.”

“……”

We chatted about trivial matters while walking. It seems Hong Yeon-hwa had spent time at a cafe with Baek Ahrin and friends.

As Hong Yeon-hwa described what she thought was the best dessert at the cafe, I humored her, and internally winced when I heard a particular name.

‘Baek Ahrin.’

The successor of the Changhae clan and a close friend to Hong Yeon-hwa.

They met in childhood during clan exchanges, and despite having almost opposite personalities, somehow they ended up deeply bonded.

Also well-known as a symbol of being adept in both literature and martial arts.

Top of her Shio-ram class.

Perfect scores in all theoretical subjects of the exam.

Second place in the combat segment, right behind Hong Yeon-hwa.

Baek Ahrin, unlike Hong Yeon-hwa who was infamous for being a ‘mad dog,’ had a good reputation.

Walking around with a constant smile and talking in a bouncing, soft manner, she easily attracted people’s attention.

Using her empathy and understanding to the fullest, Baek Ahrin maintained excellent relationships, always immensely popular within social circles.

While Hong Yeon-hwa’s bold and refreshing personality did garner some admiration, it also divided opinions. In contrast, Baek Ahrin was the type almost everyone liked.

‘……’

That was the rumor. The assessment of those around her was similar.

It was the same during my first run.

In my first run, I was still learning the ropes of the game head-on, essentially without any know-how which meant I couldn't nurture my character efficiently.

Because of that, I couldn't withstand the sabotage at the Tower of Growth next week, leading to an early game exit.

This continued with all sorts of sabotage until it became the weakest run I ever had.

In the first run, Baek Ahrin was as the rumors suggested. Despite her harsher aspects, she was essentially a character gathering good karma in a decaying world.

That perception changed a bit entering the eighth run.

"Ah."

Hong Yeon-hwa let out a sigh. Our conversation had made time fly, and we had already arrived at the library. I had told her earlier that I was going to study some magic.

[Thanks for walking me here.]

"……"

As I nodded my head in thanks, Hong Yeon-hwa seemed to be lost in thought, as if she had something to say.

Curious, I tilted my head at her.

After hesitating for a moment, she finally spoke up.

"By the way… if it's okay with you, I also—"

– Ding!

Her words were cut off by a clear alarm. The source was the smartwatch on her wrist.

"—Damn it…! Wait a second."

Her expression soured as she glanced at me, then turned around swiftly.

…As if that matters when I could see everything. Why does everyone fail to understand spatial perception? Even if she turns away, I can still see…

After checking the smartwatch and dismissing the alarm, Hong Yeon-hwa frowned. Out of respect for her privacy, I let the details of the hologram drift away.

After a brief stare down with the hologram, she turned back to me. In the brief moment she was turned away, her expression softened significantly.

"…It's nothing. I should get going too. See you in the morning."

[Yeah, I appreciate the escort.]

Deciding it's best to bury the question of whether she was being completely honest.

* * *

Hong Yeon-hwa watched Lee Hayul's retreating back with eyes full of longing.

Sensing her gaze, he fiddled with the back of his head and then resolutely entered the library.

"Sigh…"

An involuntary sigh escaped her. The thought alone was unbearably disappointing. Had that alarm not intruded, she would have offered to stay with him for a while…

She resentfully glared at her smartwatch and pressed the hologram keyboard with animosity.

[Initiating a call to 'Ms. Choi Ji-yeon'.]

– Tring… Tring… Click.

The call connected shortly after. A woman's voice, much like Hong Yeon-hwa's but with a mature edge, spoke into her ear.

[What's the occasion for my daughter who never calls?]

Exhilarated, yet with a touch of sardonic humor, her mother continued.

[I thought I might have to wait until your sophomore year to get a call.]

"What, how long has it been since I last called."

[Do you ever think about how your mother feels, hearing about her daughter's life from others?]

"No, that's not it. I called because there's something I want to ask."

[Such an unfilial daughter.]

After a petty squabble, Hong Yeon-hwa cut to the chase.

"Do you remember that elixir I took last time? Isn't there one more left? Send me one if there's any remaining."

Elixirs can be divided into two distinct types.

There are natural elixirs that form naturally in the environment and come to fruition on their own, and artificial elixirs created through the combination and processing of various materials.

The elixir Hong Yeon-hwa mentioned was a natural one—more precisely, a processed natural elixir.

Natural elixirs are generally hard to come by but offer commensurate effectiveness. There's even a saying that you might go three lifetimes without ever seeing the real deals.

However, the dilemma is that their potency could be too strong, ending up spiriting people away if consumed carelessly.

Therefore, they process these substances to create 'safe for consumption' artificial elixirs.

No easy task. Few in the world have the skill to dare modify a naturally formed elixir

according to life's grand design.

The alchemist commissioned by the Gop-hwa clan was one of those rare individuals with the requisite skills. Thanks to this, Hong Yeon-hwa had frequent access to processed natural elixirs.

Still, it wasn't something you indulged in frequently due to the strain it put on the body and the mixed effects on skill improvement, so there was quite a surplus stockpiled in her storage.

Eventually, it was her lot to use up, already assigned as her portion of the elixirs.

The authority to use or sell them lay with Hong Yeon-hwa.

Having said so, silence ensued from the other end of the communication.

'Hmm?'

Dismayed, Hong Yeon-hwa checked the connection, which was still active. Wondering if the communication had briefly dropped, she was about to speak again when a voice came through.

The voice that normally carried a confident demeanor, now trembled distinctively.

[So… you're already at the stage where you're pulling out the family's pillar to give to some boy you fancy…?]

"What the hell are you talking about, Mom…!"

Startled, Hong Yeon-hwa yelled out in shock.

CHAPTER 38
MAGIC (1)

Magic.

The implementation of order using magical energy as a cost. In essence, using mana as a cost to manifest various phenomena.

Magic as a technology was born alongside a great cataclysm.

At that time, most magic was simple and intuitive, fitting under the moniker of 'mana manipulation', but modern magic has branched into dozens, if not hundreds, of different schools of thought.

The lowest tier of magic, Mana Strike.

The ranking of 'lowest tier' here is the difficulty level assigned by the 'Magicians' Guild', the most influential association of mages in the world.

It aligns with the six-tier ranking system used by the association to categorize heroes and hunters: supreme, high, upper-middle, lower-middle, low, and lowest.

Lowest tier: indicating the simplest difficulty level for magic.

As mentioned earlier, magic during the cataclysm was so rudimentary it could be referred to as mana manipulation.

Mana Strike was also from that era. Mages at the time used magic similar to Mana Strike to vanquish monsters.

Since then, nearly two centuries have passed — enough time for several nations to rise and fall.

In those 200 years when all sorts of miraculous and strange beings were rampant, the world map changed significantly.

Over such time, magic developed. Especially in a chaotic era, the development of magic, seen as a possible solution to quell the anarchy, surged swiftly.

– Rustle

Inside the library. I sighed involuntarily as I stacked magical tomes beside me while reading.

Shio-ram is immensely vast. While most of it houses dungeons, there are also many extensive non-dungeon areas.

There are commercial districts for buying and selling necessities of life and residential zones where those workers stay.

There are dormitory areas where students live and nearby convenience facilities, as well as learning areas divided by school year, and so on.

That's why I haven't seen many students from other grades while living in Shio-ram. There will be interaction between different classes and grades after the three months of free semester, but right now, not so much.

Given such vast premises, there are also numerous libraries. This one is the closest to the freshmen's area.

The library was sparsely populated. Most first-year students are still returning from the dungeons at this time.

The library, as huge as it is, has very little human presence, making it feel empty despite the warm interior decor.

'Sigh… '

My mind wandered. The contents of the book I was reading were so complex, the thought of escaping crept into my mind. With some difficulty, I suppressed this shameful thought.

I set the book aside and opened another one I had brought with me. Another tome about magic.

I wondered why, even though hologram technology was relatively widespread, paper

tomes were still insisted upon.

In truth, flipping through books is unnecessary for someone like me who views the world through spatial perception, not eyes.

I do not need to actually flip through the pages to read the content within a book. It was a bit cumbersome before, but after growing stronger upon entering the dungeons, it has become fairly easy.

Yet I still flipped through the book. This was true for other actions as well. Though I don't have to speak out loud or see with my eyes when I converse, I choose to face people directly.

I chewed energy bars for health even though I couldn't taste them, and sometimes actually ate proper meals even if they soured my mood.

Even though I couldn't smell, I would purposely go to grassy areas to make the motions of inhaling the scent.

And then I felt worse. I could no longer enjoy what I once did. The contrast between past and present spoiled my mood.

At the same time, a feeling of defiance and a thirst arose in me. I may be like this now, but someday, when this curse is lifted, how sweet will the world look, taste, and smell?

A kind of motivation. This was how I wanted to spur myself on, even if just a little bit.

…Ah, my thoughts have strayed again. Such a pitiful guy.

I grimaced and put down my pen, stretching both arms above me for a change of pace.

'Crrreeeak… '

A thrilling sensation tickled from my fingertips down my spine. My mind suddenly sharpened, banishing the weariness that had been creeping at the edges of my consciousness.

I opened the next book.

…

…

Let’s think.

The Mana Strike I tested before entering the dungeon.

It was smaller than my torso, and its effective range was less than 10 meters. Its power was so underwhelming that it couldn’t even rend the earth properly.

The Mana Strike used in the Nokwi Tribe’s territory during the dungeon expedition.

It was twice my height in size. The actual range was enough to cross the tribe; thus, it’s more than 30 meters. Its power sliced the earth as easily as tofu and even cleaved the arms of a handful of eighth-ranked Nokwi and seventh-ranked Nokwi.

Lowest-tier magic

[Mana Strike]

– Crash!

The Strike surged from my fingertips. The rough wind pressure it generated sliced through the target. Crack! The target, ineffectively split in half, tumbled to the ground.

I exited the library, reaching a training facility. This was a magic practice room meant for testing the performance of spells.

The split target and the remnants of the Mana Strike on the floor were visited by a whirl of light which then immaculately repaired the aftermath. A restoration spell embedded in the facility.

‘Hmm… ’

The Mana Strike I just cast was inferior to the one I had used back in the Nokwi Tribe. Its output was similar to when I tested it upon returning to the main facility.

Yet, it was undeniably different from before my dungeon entry.

Its enhancement in output was clear and irrefutable.

Lowest-tier magic typically sees little use. Its spells are considered primitive and intuitive, akin to pure mana manipulation.

They lack the attribute changes of low-tier spells and don't feature the diverse compositions found in higher tiers of magic.

Before advancing to low-tier, these spells are seen as the basics of learning how to construct spells.

There are generally two reasons for a change in a spell's output.

Firstly, alteration of the spell formula itself.

A mage can adapt and modify a spell formula to suit their style.

While it is rare for someone to directly use 'Mana Strike', many use its formula as a reference for other spells or adapt its principles for different uses.

I didn't modify the formula. I employed it just as I'd seen in the tomes. Therefore, I'll disregard the first assumption.

Secondly, the distinct nature of the mana used in the spell.

The nature of the mana constructing the spell can influence the result.

Take Hong Yeon-hwa, for instance.

Although she does not wield magic… if we assume she did, could she use frost magic?

With mana of a fiery nature due to Gop-hwa?

The truth is, it's virtually impossible. The spell would warp mid-casting and fail. When mana takes on a particular attribute, it often fails to carry out spells with opposing phenomena.

Thus, most mages either delve into magic that fits their mana's nature or they intentionally alter their mana's traits for diverse uses.

I too possess certain qualities in my mana.

– Your mana is incredibly pure.

That was Liana, assisting me during mana initiation.

She made that comment upon confirming the mana within my core.

Purity in mana is favorable. Being free of impurities, it flows smoothly and straight, which increases the output of manifestation.

My mana is pure. It's a compliment that elevated my mood, yet it's strange to consider it an attribute.

– Hmm… How should I explain it? Lee Hayul's mana is exceptionally pure, I guess? It's quite different from other superhumans.

A superhuman continuously trains their mana after awakening.

They enlarge their core, broaden and solidify their circuits. They increase the total amount of mana and constantly enhance their ability to control it.

During this process, impurities get mixed in.

Drawing in mana from outside themselves invites impurities, reducing purity.

Maintaining mana purity is thus an incredibly challenging task.

The possibility that such purity affects the output of magic? It's not out of the question. However, it doesn't explain the discrepancies between using it inside versus outside the dungeon.

"Tsk…"

Neither adjusting the spell formula nor the mana's nature sufficiently answered the question.

'I want to know why if possible… '

The enhancement of the magic's output. Although it was sudden at the time, upon

reflection, it's not a negative thing at all.

Quite the contrary, it's something to be welcomed with open arms. The problem is simply the vexing lack of a reason.

'…Spatial Perception?'

The final possibility. The only change that occurred when entering the dungeon was in my spatial perception.

It has grown wider and became far more precise.

I still don't fully understand it, but it seemed like something was different about my spatial perception in the dungeon.

But regardless of that, could spatial perception influence magic?

Magic Affinity or Versatility isn't the issue here, but spatial perception?

'Complicated… '

With a sigh, I summoned my mana. Though still meager compared to other students, my mana transformed into a spell behind me.

Low-tier magic

[Fireball]

– Whoosh!

A fireball rose behind me, smaller than my head.

The fireball, tracing a red line, struck the target head-on.

– Boom!

With a small explosion, the fireball shattered the target beyond recognition. The scattered debris served as proof.

Today, I even reached out to low-tier magic.

I improved my mana manipulation level, and apparently, my proficiency increased from using magic in the dungeon, now able to grasp the essence of basic low-tier spells.

Of course, with magic being so varied, I've only just touched a small portion related to combat.

I felt slightly elevated. I was developing more smoothly than worried.

A check revealed that my martial arts had already caught up with the students, and my innate abilities were increasingly unveiling their potential.

I'd initiated into mana usage, and with a sufficient amount of mana, I could use Qi and physical reinforcement for extended periods.

Magic was an additional field I was touching upon. Currently, just a few uses would drain my mana, but with enough mana, it would serve as a robust asset.

If everything continues to proceed on the right track, my odds of dying suddenly in some unfortunate place would decrease.

The Tower of Growth. If I just fulfill my goals there, I won't suffer too much while acquiring the Confession Necklace.

'Sigh… '

Thinking of mana quantity, a sigh naturally escaped me.

With ample mana, I could freely use physical reinforcement, Qi, and magic.

The biggest problem remains increasing the amount of mana…

Was it the fifth run? I remember it as the run where focusing on magic resulted in a dramatic shortage of mana.

Hence, I had to pull all sorts of tricks to acquire elixirs and hidden pieces early in the game…

Now, without a chance at hidden pieces or anything, here I am.

‘If only I could take an elixir… ’

With my Mana Affinity, I would absorb it more efficiently.

Shaking my head at the futility, I discarded the wishful thinking. If it were that easy to get, it wouldn’t be called an elixir…

Exiting the practice room with another sigh, I expanded the spatial perception I had narrowed for focus.

The wide expanse of my spatial perception…

Inside the building, in the straight hallway, a woman walked towards me.

Her aquamarine hair, long enough to touch her waist, swirled gently.

Her eyes, reminiscent of a clear ocean, blinked and curled into a pleasant arc.

A natural and soft smile that effortlessly relaxed one’s tension.

“Hello? It’s been a long time since we last met.”

Baek Ahrin said, smiling. It was the same smile and voice I had often seen and heard in the first run.

In the eighth run, I saw and heard a different expression and words.

– I’m sorry. Please, take my place in death.

Her face frozen in an emotionless state. A voice without inflection, cold…

…A chill settled in one corner of my heart.

CHAPTER 39
MAGIC (2)

"Do you know? There's a rumor going around that you did something extraordinary during practice."

Baek Ahrin's aquamarine hair shimmered as it captured the light from the ceiling, reminding me of a sun-bathed blue sea.

It's likely that Baek Ahrin's popularity in social circles is not only due to her bright and soft aura but also her exceptional beauty, which is matched by few.

I could feel my fingertips growing colder as I contemplated this.

[Rumors?]

"Yes, I think it was the sparring room? Word has spread from the discussion among your teammates there."

The sparring room. Wasn't that where Aidan and Nam Yeon-jung were comparing the merits of sword versus spear? How did my story come up there, and why?

"Ah, not many details though. There were just a few comments on how astonishing your sensing abilities were."

It was as if Baek Ahrin had read my confusion, for she laughed lightly while explaining.

"Think of it as rumors about how remarkable Lee Hayul is."

[I see.]

"Yes, exactly… Ah."

Baek Ahrin, who had been speaking in a playful tone, suddenly spoke as if something just occurred to her.

“Come to think of it, I also heard this.”

Her gaze landed on the sign of the room I had just exited.

[Magic Practice Room]

“There was talk that Lee Hayul can cast magic, may I ask about that?”

She had seen the sign for the Magic Practice Room, so why did she still ask? Was it purely out of confirmation curiosity?

I nodded with mixed feelings. Baek Ahrin beamed and clapped her hands together with glee.

“Magic! Once you learn it, it’s incredibly beneficial. It’s useful in combat, everyday life… I’ve learned it as well. Life before and after mastering magic is worlds apart.”

Baek Ahrin had also mastered magic. In the original story, she handled magic at an expert level.

“So, Lee Hayul has just begun magic as well! Surely learning magic is a decision you won’t regret.”

Her primary weapon is a spear. In battle, she engages with a fighting style that revolves around the use of her spear. But she doesn’t rely solely on it.

Her innate ability, Changhae, allows her to freely manipulate both water and ice.

Water takes care of healing and harmonizing, while ice handles defense and offensive maneuvers. She doesn’t need to wield her spear directly to pressure enemies and protect and heal allies.

Close combat through martial arts, the versatility of protecting and healing allies with her innate abilities, and pressuring and attacking enemies—topped off with a variety of magic.

Baek Ahrin’s concept in the original story is that of an all-rounder; proficient in all areas, she plays a pivotal role in supporting the team.

To put it another way—

“The advantage of magic is that learning it broadens your options, right? It can be immensely helpful in both offense and support, so you definitely won’t regret learning it.”

—Jack-of-all-trades.

When setting up a character in the previous world and choosing the Jack-of-all-trades, Baek Ahrin was the perfect role model.

…

…

Time flew by as I searched for materials in the library and went on to test the magic in the practice room.

By the time I left the practice room, night had already fallen.

Walking along a path only illuminated by the faint moonlight, as the evening twilight had vanished, I heard footsteps not my own right beside me.

“Humming~”

The source was Baek Ahrin. When I mentioned it might be time for me to head back, she said she was planning to return as well and suggested we go together.

I observed Baek Ahrin, who was strolling alongside me within the range of my spatial perception.

Walking with hands clasped behind her back, she jauntily took each step while humming.

The sound of her steps paired with her tune merged beautifully with the intermittent moonlight, creating quite an ambiance.

If only I could have seen the night sky as well, it would have been even more picturesque. Unfortunately, that was not possible.

It was with mixed feelings that I smiled at the still beaming Baek Ahrin.

For me, Hong Yeon-hwa was a completely different person from her original character.

Having cast aside her violent tendencies, Hong Yeon-hwa was the kind soul who wore a look of devastation whenever I got hurt.

Despite only a month or so of acquaintance, I never formed a deeper bond in my life than with Hong Yeon-hwa.

In contrast to her… Baek Ahrin seemed almost identical to her original character.

“Are you wondering why I seem so approachable?”

Baek Ahrin suddenly asked, as I walked silently.

A few paces ahead, she turned her head to look back at me, a playful smile on her lips.

“There’s no particular reason, really.”

In nearly every run, Baek Ahrin approaches the special admissions student in a friendly manner.

“One day, I believe Lee Hayul will achieve greatness. I don’t care about what others say; it’s just what I think.”

Special admission—a position still viewed with subtle skepticism, yet also with an expectant gaze as if it’s a winning lottery ticket.

Baek Ahrin approaches with a similar view.

[The reason seems simpler than I expected.]

“Ahaha. I might sound materialistic, but… it’s not bad, is it?”

Her footsteps resonate louder than usual.

“Special admission… It was startling to have such a student appear in the same year as me for the first time ever since Shio-ram’s foundation, but… it turned out to be not so bad after all.”

We had arrived at the dorm building, as high-end as any skyscraper.

“It certainly won’t hurt to be friends with Lee Hayul, who will undoubtedly flourish. If we start with trivialities like this, we might even build a mutually supportive relationship in the future.”

Just before reaching the main entrance, Baek Ahrin suddenly turned around. We were now facing each other directly, with Baek Ahrin’s playful yet soft smile still hanging on her face.

“I guess it’s been a long talk… So, to sum it up—let’s be good friends in the future!”

With that, she reached out her hand. Baek Ahrin was looking at me with a broad smile. After a moment’s hesitation, I extended my own hand to meet hers.

Our hands clasped together. A soft yet cool sensation was conveyed through our palms.

Then, Baek Ahrin leaned forward substantially. Her faint breath brushed against my ear.

She whispered,

“Don’t become too close to Yeon-hwa. She’s keeping her friends at a distance these days. Don’t hang out with just the two of you; come join us instead.”

Winking at me as she withdrew her hand, Baek Ahrin took a few steps back.

“Sorry for keeping you up when you must be tired. I really should get going now. Sweet dreams!”

With that, she turned away. As far as I knew from the original story and from what Hong Yeon-hwa had mentioned, Baek Ahrin didn’t stay in the dorm building but had her own separate residence.

“……”

Baek Ahrin approaches the player in every run. As explained earlier, the reason is to forge a bond with a player who will one day achieve greatness.

The first run. I didn't attain greatness. It was a time when I was oblivious to hidden pieces and storylines.

Until my graduation from Shio-ram, I hadn't displayed any remarkable abilities.

Thanks to the growth adjustments for being a special admission, my results were comparatively high, but they were only equivalent to other students.

She wouldn't have been satisfied with someone like me.

Yet, Baek Ahrin was kind to the player of the first run. When chaos returned to the world and the player of the first run was fighting desperately, Baek Ahrin fought alongside as well.

For sure, she remained a steadfast ally until the end of the first run.

The Eighth Run [Heavenly Thunder]

Although it did not reach the utmost potential of specialties like [Diamond Warrior] or [Hybrid Summoner], it was enough to survive brazen encounters with the strongest in the world.

The specialty was long-distance sniping.

In that run, I honed an archery-related innate ability to its fullest, and through hidden pieces, awakened a brain attribute innate ability.

From a spot untouched by opponents' attacks, I unleashed a deluge of arrows and the baptism of thunder.

There was also a tactic involving spatial artifacts, instantaneously teleporting full-powered attacks right into enemies' faces.

A particularly well-developed run. Especially since long-range combat was a favorable strategy for survival, I thought the eighth run would last quite long.

Contrary to my expectations, I exited early.

The eighth run was different than the first.

Thanks to efficient cultivation, I managed to slay a third-ranked entity before even graduating from Shio-ram.

After graduation, I traveled across the magical realm, pinpointing and hunting high-level monsters, gaining fame by sniping traitors all over the place.

Baek Ahrin would have considered me a jackpot well played. Due to her early investments, she was poised to reap ample interest.

However.

The eighth run ended with Baek Ahrin's betrayal.

* * *

Baek Ahrin walked silently under the night sky. Her strides, usually lively, seemed to emanate no presence.

Suddenly, the humming stopped as well. What was once an atmosphere filled with lively footsteps and tunes now carried only the cool stillness of dawn.

A mood starkly different from her usual spirited disposition. It was calm and cold.

She turned her head briefly, recalling the actions just taken, wrestling with the thoughts and the processing of information in her mind.

The line of reasoning concluded swiftly. She lightly tapped her lips with her index finger.

"Why would he be afraid of me?"

Baek Ahrin tilted her head quizzically, pondering.

CHAPTER 40
MAGIC (3)

Entry into The Tower of Growth was scheduled for the fourth week's Monday.

The night I was seen off by Baek Ahrin and came in was Tuesday of the third week.

That dawn, I battled through with magic tomes until daybreak.

Although part of me wanted to surrender to fatigue and sleep, my will to grow as much as possible before entering The Tower of Growth prevailed.

Ultimately, I spent the whole night awake. Counting from the dungeon, that made it almost two sleepless nights in a row.

The next day.

Dragging my tired body, I reached Ipchun class in the early morning, which was bustling with activity.

And this was before everyone had even arrived.

If you listened, half of the talk was about the dungeon: aches from sleeping there, how tiresome it was to track monsters, and so on…

Many were boasting to friends about the difficulty and achievements of the last two days.

"…Hayul."

Then I was unexpectedly nabbed by the crushed expression of Hong Yeon-hwa.

"Ughhh…"

My cheeks bulged out to each side, akin to kneading freshly extracted dough. A faint pain accompanied it.

“What happened last night…? Huh…? Why does your face look even more dead than yesterday…?”

Heads turned in Ipchun class, not because it was something odd to see. It was now just a routine sight.

At first, everyone was shocked, but as this behavior repeated, it seemed they’d grown accustomed to it.

“Ugh…”

Speech was impossible. I wanted to retort, even with holograms, but… how could I with Hong Yeon-hwa looking so worryingly at me?

It felt weirdly not unpleasant to have my cheeks tugged like this. In fact, there was something oddly comforting about it.

A difficult-to-describe, squishy emotion filled me. A warmth seemed to grow somewhere inside my chest.

After five minutes of whining and complex emotions, I was finally free. I massaged my stinging cheeks with my hands, trying to cool them down.

“…Come here.”

Perhaps distressed by what she had done, Hong Yeon-hwa reached out and gently caressed my cheek.

Her touch, tinged with a tinge of guilt, was quite soft. Being touched like that, I almost believed my cheeks were deflating.

It was a typical morning start.

“Hmm?”

An incongruous voice interjected into the usual morning routine. Hong Yeon-hwa looked around.

There stood a woman, with arms crossed and an incredulous look—Baek Ahrin in her school uniform, nodding her head with her tied-up ponytail swaying with the

motion.

“Ahrin?”

“Yes, it’s Baek Ahrin, who has been neglected by Hong Yeon-hwa for days.”

“What’s with the dog talk… Umm, stop making weird sounds.”

“…Why not just curse?”

“Cursing? What cursing? Why are you saying such strange things? When did I ever do that?”

Baek Ahrin shook her head in disbelief, then composed herself and turned to smile warmly at me.

“Good morning, Hayul.”

[Good morning.]

I managed my expression and returned the greeting.

It was a regular morning exchange. A commonplace conversation. Despite not being very close to Baek Ahrin, it was the sort of talk shared even among strangers.

Hong Yeon-hwa tilted her head, looking puzzled, as if it was unusual, but didn’t consider it strange.

Meanwhile, Baek Ahrin’s lips curved into a playful smile.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

“…What?”

“I did see you to the dorm, but I was just checking, you know.”

The atmosphere got strange with her follow-up. The nuance was kind of… something else, and so the tenor of the glances around us changed.

Taken at face value, the question seemed innocuous, yet with a different emotional

line added, the interpretation shifted. Baek Ahrin's sly tone magnified it.

Hong Yeon-hwa's head tilted, blinking several times as if to confirm what she'd heard. Then her expression hardened like stone.

Click, clack. Hong Yeon-hwa's head turned sharply.

Her gaze moved from Baek Ahrin's beaming face to me, examining my overtly fatigued visage with scrutiny.

Whoosh. I felt a surge of Gop-hwa within her.

I shook my head desperately.

…

…

"Hmph, it hurts."

"You're talking rubbish, causing misunderstandings."

A bump had been raised slightly on Baek Ahrin's head, who now bore an aggrieved look.

Gingerly caressing her own head, the bump was quickly hidden thanks to her skillful touch imbued with mana.

"Who goes around speaking like that?"

"What did I say? It's all Hong Yeon-hwa's misunderstanding. I mean, what were you thinking to commit such an outrage? Could it be that…?"

"Shh…! Be quiet."

With a "could it be" from Baek Ahrin and hands cupped over her mouth, Hong Yeon-hwa ground her teeth in apparent irritation.

It was routine for Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin to bicker back and forth.

The issue was that their squabbles always drew even more attention.

My seat was at the very back by the window, and now, with Hong Yeon-hwa to one side, Baek Ahrin joined us as well.

Hong Yeon-hwa made sharp retorts, and Baek Ahrin responded with feigned innocence before slyly counterattacking. Such exchanges continued until the lecture began.

…

…

Days passed.

As always, my days were busy without pause.

Baek Ahrin, who slyly joined the rearmost seats, bickered with Hong Yeon-hwa as my background music while I welcomed the morning in Ipchun class.

Morning theory lectures were followed by one-on-one teachings with Professor Atra in the afternoons.

“To cast a spell, you must assemble the spell formula with mana as the material, and depending on the complexity of the spell formula, it’s divided into one of six grades.”

During Friday’s “Basic Magic Theory (I)” lecture,

The middle-aged professor with the notable long robe and mustache was immersed in his teaching at the podium.

“Lowest-tier and low-tier spells are often looked down upon. It’s true they do have less effect compared to higher grades. But remember this,” he said, meeting the eyes of the attentive students.

“A mage is one who prepares. The most powerful and dangerous mage in this world is the one who has finished preparing.”

Complicated spell formulas proliferated on the hologram projected across the wall. It wasn’t just a single spell formula, but several integrated organically.

“Delaying the activation of an assembled spell formula. The most basic example would be a magical artifact. By occupying space with their formulas, mages can create their own domains. In these areas, even lower-tier spells can demonstrate satisfactory efficiency.”

These areas are commonly referred to as a mage’s workshop.

Occupying the space with one’s branded spells and establishing a realm of mana sovereignty, then unleashing prepared spell formulas.

Essentially, it’s about constructing an environment suitable for oneself through magic.

The main time I used this method was during the fifth run,

A run where I was not a pure mage but had a heretical route, so I didn’t properly utilize workshops or fortifications.

I had been more focused on countering rather than creating workshops. Thus, I had some idea of how troublesome a mage’s workshop could be when the opposition prepared well.

‘Huff… ’

During the theory lecture on magic, and while I listened attentively to various subjects, my concerns about magic were especially pronounced in recent days.

The professor’s explanation was complex but not entirely difficult to understand.

The professor, once a mid-tier hero in active service and now a scholar dedicated to theory and education post-retirement, was adept in his explanations, and a newbie like me could grasp enough as long as I concentrated.

“— That concludes today’s lecture. Use the remaining time to prepare for your next class.”

The roughly two-hour lecture ended. I overhead some students thanking the departing professor while I mindlessly drummed my desk with a pen.

Today was Friday of the third week.

Since the dungeon practice ended last Tuesday, the lectures had mostly revolved around the tower and magic theory.

It was a welcome development, particularly regarding magic.

Undoubtedly, the lessons were beneficial. I had no reason to deny it. The classification of magic grades and the applications of lowest-tier and low-tier spells were explained in detail and relatively easy to understand.

However, I still had not uncovered the reason for my increased magic output. An involuntary sigh escaped me.

Once the lecture finished, the surroundings buzzed with activity. Some students began to calmly prepare for the next class, while others engaged in conversations with nearby friends.

The topics were similar.

The Tower of Growth.

Very few days remained until entry. Moreover, today would be the last day of school before we entered the tower. I wouldn't see my classmates again until we assembled just before entering.

'Ah, ugh… '

The matter of my magic's output. I had wanted to clarify it before entering the tower, but things hadn't gone as planned.

I participated actively in classes and pored over texts whenever I had a spare moment after lectures.

At times I even sought advice from Professor Liana, but it was a phenomenon even she did not fully comprehend.

My head throbbed. Perhaps from the recent stretch of sleepless nights, it felt worse than usual.

I pressed my temples with my hands, trying to halt the headache.

“Hayul.”

In the midst of the bustling surroundings and piercing headache,

Strangely, Hong Yeon-hwa’s voice cut through clearly.

When I turned, there was Hong Yeon-hwa, giving a furtive glance my way, with a hand extended. Held within her grasp was a candy, bundled in its invariably upscale wrapping.

[Thank you.]

It was a constant kindness. As I unwrapped the sleek surface of the candy and popped it in my mouth—something I had balked at initially due to the price but had grown accustomed to receiving daily—it now stirred no particular feeling. It was as if my sense of economy was being destroyed.

I rolled the round candy around with my tongue.

Its familiar non-taste. A contrast to the sweetness of the past that now only soured my mood.

But at the moment, I didn’t feel that bad.

Was I being too eager to resolve this matter?

Sucking on the tasteless candy, I suddenly thought it might be impossible to find the cause as quickly as I hoped.

Perhaps I was too hasty in seeking the cause. My eagerness, with the impending tower entry, could be narrowing my perspective.

The worry that a tumble in The Tower of Growth might plummet my growth curve might be constraining my thoughts.

Lately, I found myself flustered by many things. Issues thrown at me from all sides filled my head to the brim.

‘…Being too hasty isn’t good either.’

The Tower of Growth was now just around the corner. If I overexerted my body and mind any further, I might ironically end up frail within The Tower of Growth.

Should that lead to unsatisfactory results… there'd be no greater folly.

"Hmm."

While engaged in this self-reflection, Hong Yeon-hwa, having noticed me fiddling with the candy, suddenly coughed to catch my attention.

"Hayul, do you happen to have time after today's major lecture?"

[Time?]

With the candy reduced to the size of a grain of rice, I chewed and swallowed it, then tilted my head inquisitively.

Time? Most likely, yes.

Professor Atra was punctual with lecture timings, and there were no further engagements afterwards.

"So… could you spare some time for me today?"

After brief contemplation, I nodded, and Hong Yeon-hwa's anxious expression lit up with relief.

"Thanks! I'll text you where to meet."

[May I ask what the meeting is for?]

"Oh. I should've mentioned that first."

With a chagrined laugh, Hong Yeon-hwa brushed her hair with her hand awkwardly.

"Just, something like a gift for you…?"

'A gift?'

Don't I already receive candies? I prodded, asking if she couldn't tell me in advance,

but Hong Yeon-hwa evasively dodged answering.

Mixed with worry and anticipation, I awaited the unknown.

CHAPTER 41
ELIXIR (1)

The day I finished dungeon practice was also the day I troubled Professors Atra and Liana.

Honestly, I had no face to see either of them—especially Professor Atra.

After all, it's not every day you see someone come to greet you and end up vomiting in their presence.

Batting away a helping hand with a smack—it was a disgraceful act, and I felt ashamed even thinking about it now.

That's why I dreaded meeting Professor Atra the following day.

She might have let it slide considering my poor condition that day, or perhaps she just felt indifferent.

– Are you feeling okay?

The unease had dissipated when I met Professor Atra the next day. Rather than scolding me, she showed concern for my well-being.

I must have misjudged people.

A strange sense of gratitude washed over me toward Professor Atra who, despite my causing such a nuisance, still expressed her worry.

– Thud!

The old training ground.

I pushed off the ground with my legs. I propelled my body forward and reached out with my hand, with blue Qi trailing behind.

In the middle of the extension, another hand intertwined. Shaking off the grab at my wrist, I swung my leg.

– Bang!

A rough noise erupted. A cloud of dust arose and then settled around the area.

Blue Qi twined around my leg. Professor Atra's forearm, which blocked it, was wrapped in a faint golden Qi.

Since that day… the sparring sessions starting Wednesday had changed slightly.

Post-dungeon practice, my spatial perception had become sharper, allowing me to better anticipate Professor Atra's movements.

This led to an increase in the rate of my growth. I could feel my skills improving noticeably.

Wondering if I had reached a satisfactory level, Professor Atra began teaching me the methods for generating and controlling Qi and Qi reinforcement.

The method for producing Qi is simple in explanation.

Mana must be condensed strongly and solidly. Essentially, you pump in a lot of mana, and when compressed, it becomes Qi.

Simple as the explanation may be, it requires a certain level of mana manipulation ability.

Thanks to my mana affinity, I manifested it instantly. Things difficult for others in terms of mana were relatively easy for me.

Thus, I was smoothly mastering Qi reinforcement which strengthens the body using mana, Qi which creates armor and weapons, and magic which manifests principles through mana.

Hands entwined. The Qi covering them gnawed and tore at each other.

After a momentary stalemate, the distance widened, and Professor Atra pulled one arm back. Golden Qi wrapped around her fist. I enhanced my own fist with Qi.

The distance closed between our fists. Then, the collision.

– Bang!

A sharp pain surged through my right arm, dust scattering in all directions. My legs, unable to withstand the shock, skidded across the ground, leaving a straight trail.

The Qi that had been wobbling precariously post-impact dissipated into the air. The structure had shaken due to the impact, but more so because there wasn't enough mana to sustain the Qi.

"Stop."

Observing the dispersing Qi, Professor Atra spoke. The golden Qi around her arm dispersed as well.

"Your speed and strength in manifesting Qi are impressive, but you seem to lack the mana to sustain it."

A deficiency in mana capacity. A chronic issue for those freshly ascended to superhuman status and new to mana.

My mana capacity had been steadily increasing. Whenever I had time, I practiced meditation and exercised my core. There had been progress.

My capacity had increased several times since the sparring with Aidan, even though I hadn't been able to focus on mana due to various obligations.

But it wasn't enough to comfortably use Qi reinforcement and Qi continuously.

Even now, just a few minutes of sparing had nearly depleted my mana.

While I was catching my breath, Professor Atra checked the time and then said,

"That's enough for today."

[Thank you for the training.]

At least the training had reached a certain level, as the number of times I was hit had decreased. Even if I got bruises, they healed quickly, likely due to my recovery

training.

As I was loosening my stiff hand, Professor Atra approached and extended a water bottle.

“Here.”

[Thank you.]

I replied via hologram and accepted the bottle, feeling its coolness and promptly gulping down the contents.

The cold water pouring down my parched throat brought a refreshing sensation. I’ve always disliked the cold but appreciated the chill: that hasn’t changed.

As I was eagerly drinking, Professor Atra reached out to my other hand, the one not holding the bottle.

She grabbed my arm and lifted it to eye level.

‘?’

Inspecting my arm closely, Professor Atra said,

“…You’re not injured, but there is enough fatigue accumulated in your body. Rest during the weekend. Any more and it will interfere with your schedule.”

Her advice was straightforward. I finished the water and nodded in agreement.

Professor Atra stared at my face for a while, then turned away.

It seemed like she had something to say, her lips twitching just before, but perhaps deciding it was not important, she remained silent.

Feeling Professor Atra leave my spatial perception, I too moved on.

With the major lectures now over, it was time to meet Hong Yeon-hwa.

…

…

The meeting place Hong Yeon-hwa texted me was a cafe in the commercial district, the same brand as the one I had met with my group during the last dungeon practice.

I remembered this brand being the most well-known cafe in this world.

I couldn't come straight after my major lecture.

Covered in sweat and dust from sparring, it wouldn't have been presentable to meet in that state.

"Hayul, over here."

The cafe's second floor offered private rooms where one needn't worry about outside gazes. The windows were treated so that the inside couldn't be seen from the outside.

Entering the room number provided in the text, I found Hong Yeon-hwa already seated, idly passing the time.

[Sorry I'm late.]

"You're not late; I just got here myself. I've already placed our order."

As I sat down opposite Hong Yeon-hwa, she pushed a glass across the table. It was iced tea, bobbing with ice cubes.

I ran my finger along the rim of the glass, feeling the undeniable cold. The ice hadn't melted a bit, which could mean her statement about just arriving was true.

However, the ice alone wasn't conclusive evidence.

Thanks to my mana affinity, I could feel the spell inscribed on the glass.

Before I had knowledge of magic, I'd have simply noticed the 'mana forming a specific configuration.'

Now, I could analyze the spell formula. It was a glass etched with a temperature-control spell.

Meaning, no matter how long one waited here, the ice wouldn't melt due to the magic.

'Magic.'

In this modern fantasy world, electricity was scarcely used in industry.

Mana replaced its role, with magic substituting for many mechanical functions.

Within the range of my active spatial perception, the number of spell formulas that came into view easily exceeded thousands.

"You haven't slept well these past few days. Are you okay?"

[I'm fine. Besides, I'm planning to rest well starting today.]

"…Haven't you been saying that since Tuesday and still been up all night?"

[I mean it this time.]

Hong Yeon-hwa looked at me skeptically. It was true I had made similar claims all week, but this time I was serious.

Ultimately, I really needed to rest, or it would hinder my entrance to The Tower of Growth. Regardless of my intentions, I was in a position where I had to take a break.

"…With the tower entry next week, let's finish quickly and head back so you can rest."

Small talk was brief.

It was a casual conversation that could typically take place. What we ate yesterday, how I felt then, and so on…

Hong Yeon-hwa checked the time and my face occasionally, and with a reluctant expression fumbled in her pocket, finally producing a small, rectangular box that was smaller than a fist.

The box's design was obviously luxurious. Made of deep ink-colored wood with a smooth surface, the intricately carved patterns felt as though they required meticulous craftsmanship through my spatial perception.

Beyond the box's exterior, a formidable mana emanated from within. Even though I could sense a spell on the box preventing mana from leaking out, the level was still significant.

"Remember the reward I mentioned before? As I thought about it, something occurred to me."

With an awkward scratch of her head, Hong Yeon-hwa placed the box on the table and pushed it towards me, opening the lid.

Simultaneously, my spatial perception flickered. A vast whirlpool of mana enveloped the room's interior.

I stood agape.

Nestled on the fine cushion within the box was a luminous blue elixir.

"This is an elixir made from the root of the Fairy Tree, combined with various other medicinal herbs."

Fairy Tree. A tree that had undergone transformations due to long periods of habitation by exceptionally rare fairies. Even in forests thick with dense mana, finding such a tree is as hard as picking stars from the sky.

The reward mentioned before, the openly presented box, that anticipatory gaze looking at me…

They all pointed to one fact. I couldn't calm the fluttering at the corners of my eyes.

I lifted my trembling hand and pushed the box away.

"Uh?"

Hong Yeon-hwa let out a puzzled sound. My actions, apparently unexpected, even caused her pupils to quake.

"Hayul?"

Her gaze fixated directly on me. A question hung in her eyes: why aren't you accepting it?

After calming my anxious insides with a sip of iced tea, I carefully shook my head from side to side.

[I can't accept this.]

"Why…?"

[How can I accept something like this?]

In this world, when people talk about consuming elixirs, the vast majority think of synthetic elixirs.

Various ingredients imbued with mana are grown and then forced together, cranking them up to the level of elixirs.

They aren't technically elixirs by nature, but through synergy between ingredients and the skill of alchemists, they're artificially elevated.

Of course, this process consumes an enormous amount of money, time, and care.

That's the case with typical synthetic elixirs. They easily shatter the bank with costs in the billions.

But natural elixirs, born at the grade of elixirs, are on a different level.

Their quality surpasses the human-made elixirs, born from nature and engorged with the essence of the earth.

This was a natural elixir. Different from synthetic ones, it could not be bought simply with money.

From this point, it's not money that's needed but something else.

In other words, it's something I can't easily repay.

I could find a way to repay her for candies. Monsters can fetch more money than you'd think.

But not this. This is beyond my capacity to repay.

I shook my head desperately. I couldn't accept it. How could I take it when I feel so guilty?

Hong Yeon-hwa presented it as compensation.

Compensation? For what.

The day of the freshman welcome when she knocked me over? When she said to watch where I was going? The time she accidentally knocked me out during sparring?

Just for those trivial matters? Unthinkable. It's an impossible exchange. There's a value disparity that cannot be reconciled on the same scale.

Hearing my thoughts, Hong Yeon-hwa sighed and then carefully began to persuade me.

"This does hold the meaning of compensation, but it also carries the weight of investment."

Hong Yeon-hwa is the heiress to the Gop-hwa clan.

Gop-hwa Clan. Along with Changhae and Taesan, they are a major force maintaining balance in the southwestern part of the Korean peninsula, where the clan's founder was born.

What's certain is that, even by world standards, the Gop-hwa clan is an impossibly grand power. Even three-year-olds know the stature of the Gop-hwa clan.

"Although this elixir falls under the purview of my authority, the fact that the clan's overall steward—my mother—readily sent this elixir means there's a reason."

Overall steward… The position entrusted by the clan head to oversee major and minor clan affairs. Typically, a trustworthy and capable close relative of the current clan head is appointed… or so I heard when I was dealing with the Changhae clan in the original story.

At this point in time, Hong Yeon-hwa's mother is the steward of the Gop-hwa clan.

'Investment… '

I understood if it was tied to investment.

A student brought in under special admission by The Tower of Growth's owner. But, looking at him, he seems flawed.

As such, my usual perception is that of a lottery ticket that seems like a winner but arouses peculiar suspicion. Of course, that viewpoint has somewhat faded after the last sparring session.

Regardless, it's entirely reasonable for the Gop-hwa clan, with the capability to procure even crafted natural elixirs, to invest in a special admission student by giving them an elixir.

'Hmm… '

The idea of it being an investment lessened my reluctance. If it's about investment, it means the Gop-hwa clan has motives beyond mere generosity.

Still, the sense of obligation didn't completely dissipate. This investment would remain, akin to a debt in my mind. At least, that's how I received it.

"I really hope you'll accept it."

While I pondered, Hong Yeon-hwa suddenly reached out with both arms and grabbed my hands.

"This is both an acknowledgment of my many wrongs and an investment from my clan. And…"

Her hands, tightly clasping mine, trembled slightly. Hong Yeon-hwa caressed my enclosed hand and bit her lip before continuing.

"There's something else… I haven't figured it all out yet, but there's something else I owe you a greater apology for. Really… something difficult to express how sorry I am."

Something else she owed me an apology for? I couldn't understand what she meant.

Hong Yeon-hwa looked at me with an earnestness I couldn't place.

“So, please accept it. Of course, I promise you, under my name, that I’ll never use this as leverage to demand anything from you.”

It would be a lie to say I wasn’t tempted when she put it like that.

Part of me wondered, why couldn’t I just accept it?

‘…… ’

After a moment of contemplation, I nodded. Hong Yeon-hwa’s face instantly brightened. From her smile, you’d think she was the one receiving the gift, not me.

…

…

After Hong Yeon-hwa escorted me to the dormitory, I hurried into my room. I could hear the pounding of my heart as I rushed inside.

– Thunk

The door closed without a creak, the curtains already drawn. I took a moment to scan the surroundings with spatial perception before sitting down in the center of the room.

Then, after a few deep breaths to calm my excited mind, I fumbled for the box in my pocket.

It was a small, elegant container. Opening it, a refreshing mana gradually ascended.

‘Wow… ’

Amazement naturally escaped me at the spectacle of mana. Even someone without mana affinity could simply feel the force of the mana within.

I carefully lifted the elixir with tentative fingers, the contact with my skin almost sending shivers due to the mana.

The issue of mana capacity. Regardless of anything else, this elixir would likely resolve most of that problem.

I didn't expect my mana to be robust enough to unleash hundreds of spells immediately, but an intuitive certainty told me that it would provide a basic foundation for a proper battle.

It was Friday evening.

Entrance to The Tower of Growth wouldn't be until Monday morning.

If I took the elixir now and tuned the gained mana while easing my body's fatigue, the timing would be perfect.

I swallowed hard, filled with profound gratitude to Hong Yeon-hwa, and placed the elixir in my mouth.

The elixir on my tongue melted stickily as if recognizing its master, sliding down my throat.

Moments later.

"Ugh…?"

Something seemed to reflux up my throat, and black blood trickled from the corner of my mouth.

Oh hell…

CHAPTER 42
ELIXIR (2)

Consuming a natural elixir carelessly could lead to dire consequences.

A natural elixir, saturated over time with the essence of nature, is a vast mass of mana in and of itself.

To consume such a thing thoughtlessly is to invite disaster, as the body might not withstand the turbulent energy and could burst into pieces.

Ordinary people, unable to wield mana, are at even greater risk, and most superhumans would be reduced to a state of invalidity.

Therefore, natural elixirs demand an exceedingly meticulous consumption method. Moreover, even when the method is followed, a powerful superhuman stands by during the intake in case of unexpected circumstances.

It's possible to prevent the danger inherent in natural elixirs through special processing techniques.

Not a process of turning something that isn't an elixir into one, but a technique for making a dangerous elixir safe.

It's not about handling low-grade materials, but about handling high-grade ones. The latter requires a much higher level of skill.

Natural elixirs are dangerous precisely because their efficacy is so potent. When processed, it's possible to retain their efficacy while eliminating the risk factor.

It's a crude analogy, but similar to deboning a fish before consumption.

Before taking the elixir.

I swept the vicinity with spatial perception. I couldn't identify any potentially dangerous elements. It was my personal dormitory room, the door closed and

curtains drawn.

There was nothing around that posed a danger. With that assurance, I sat down, settled my mana, and then consumed the elixir.

Even just opening the container let out a surge that nearly suffused the surroundings with mana—an orb-shaped elixir teeming with energy.

Wasn't the root of the Fairy Tree the main ingredient? It was practically a piece of nature's spirit itself. That's why it possessed such dense mana.

I cautiously savored the elixir. I couldn't taste it—whether it inherently lacked flavor or I simply couldn't perceive it, I wasn't sure.

Soon, the elixir melted slowly. It dissolved like a viscous mucus before sloshing down my throat of its own accord.

My mouth filled with mana. As I followed the elixir, mana spread abundantly within me. The moment the elixir that had traveled down my throat touched the core near my heart, mana exploded throughout my body.

– Thump! Thump! Thump!

My heart pounded wildly. The core heated up in sync, and a tidal wave of mana surged through every circuit of my body.

From my head to the tips of my fingers and toes. Even after reaching the extremities, the mana showed no signs of stopping. It rebounded from the ends of my body, stirring everything once more.

My body grew hot. Parts stirred by mana warmed up, and then another wave of mana swept through, leaving coolness in its wake.

'Oh… '

I internally marveled at the state within my body.

The contradictory sensations of burning yet chilling. With each stir of mana, the core accumulated pure energy, and the circuits creaking from the mana's passage strengthened.

Natural elixir. In the original story, it was simply a boost to stats and a temporary buff, but experiencing it in reality showed that such a description wasn't adequate.

Certainly, the timing of the intake was also fitting. I was right in the midst of a growth phase. In short, it was the perfect time for consumption.

So there I was, exclaiming in ecstasy, pleasantly observing the changes in my body.

The bloated sensation came abruptly. Something began to rise within me.

'Huh?'

It was somewhat similar to the nausea I had felt before, but different. Previously, I might have had a chance to suppress it, but now, I couldn't hold it back.

At last, something that had reached my mouth leaked out through the corners.

The blood was closer to black than red.

'Oh.'

'Uh… '

'What?'

My stilled thoughts tangled and resumed.

Blood had come out. It's rare for a person to go through life without ever seeing blood. Even a small wound on the body will show it.

Blood coming from the mouth. It's typically uncommon, but I've experienced it. If you take several full-force kicks to the stomach, blood mixes in with the cough.

– Drip, drip…

Blood leaking from the mouth like this… happens when you're stabbed in the stomach. How I survived that, I still don't know.

No, that's not the issue.

Why is blood seeping from my mouth right now? I hadn't been punched in the stomach or stabbed.

Given the current circumstances, the only cause could be… the elixir?

'Why?'

Natural elixir. Consuming it rashly could burst your body. Hence, the elixir given by Hong Yeon-hwa was processed to reduce such risks.

Even if the danger is minimized, it can still pose a risk to ordinary people, so it's assumed that superhumans are the ones to consume it.

I am already a superhuman who has awakened to mana. A superhuman who can embrace and wield mana, yet why is blood streaming from my mouth, and why is its volume increasing?

There's already a handful of black blood congealed on the floor. I struggled to calm my confused mind.

Was there poison? I couldn't tell with spatial perception.

The thought that Hong Yeon-hwa wanted to kill me? Never crossed my mind.

Then, could the creator have done it deliberately? I didn't know. But at least from my perspective, there appeared to be nothing wrong.

The elixir certainly had been functioning as intended.

…So the problem lies with my body?

'Ugh… '

In that moment, my consciousness faded. It felt like being swept away by an irresistible current.

'Ah, this is bad.'

If I lose consciousness, what will happen…?

Before I could finish the thought, my consciousness was severed.

…

…

The forest was teeming with life.

The night sky, like a black canvas, was densely studded with stars, illuminating the land below.

The clean river water reflected the starlight, creating an illusion as if stars were equally scattered across land and sky.

Sturdy trees crowded the lakeshore. Their thick trunks gave the impression of unyielding strength against any storm, while the robust branches and leaves brimmed with vigor.

The various grasses carpeting the ground also radiated vitality. Everything was pulsing with a lively green essence.

It was a dreamlike forest. If one were to imagine the most beautiful forest in a dream, it would likely look like this.

– Friend?

– A new friend?

– Don’t know! Never seen this friend before!

Suddenly, countless motes of light swarmed in. Green, yellow, blue, lime…

Beneath tree roots, behind sizable rocks, within the star-filled lake, behind countless leaves.

The colorful motes emerged from all over, roaming the area. It was as if they were welcoming a new person.

– Not a friend…?

– Not a friend.

– Eh, then what is it?

The motes floating in the air seemed confused, buzzing around. Amidst this, one mote burst forth.

– Family! Not a friend, but family!

– Family? Really?

– Yes! It's family!

An exclamation? from one mote seemed to baffle the others, but gradually they agreed. They danced around as if celebrating with fireworks.

– Family! A new family member!

The motes were abuzz with excitement. The surrounding branches rustled in response. Leaves swayed as if dancing, and a refreshing breeze blew in.

The wind made the grass bend and stand, dancing along. The motes rode the wind, adding to the dance.

It was a beautiful and surreal sight, as if nature itself was celebrating the arrival of a new family member.

– Let's play!

A lime-colored mote approached and said?

– That hill over there is quite nice!

A yellow mote commented.

– And let's go there too! The starlight twinkles so beautifully!

A blue mote added.

– Not just there! Let's all go to the forest…!

The words? of the variously colored motes resonated in my ears. Yet it wasn't noisy at all; it was like a melody, calming the mind and soul.

– Our new family member! Let's all go over there!

A red mote… a…

Red. Red. Red… Fire, flames…

Gop-hwa, Hong Yeon-hwa, evening glow, warm embrace, elixir, black blood…

'Oh?'

My hazy consciousness sharpened. My mind tensed.

'Where is this?'

As that question came to mind, my consciousness sank. The sight of the motes vanished into the distance.

Inside the receding motes, I could see something small.

Petals came to mind—a thin, soft wing. Each flutter spread beautiful motes of light.

…

…

"……"

My cheek, pressed against something, felt sticky. No, my entire body was sticky. My mind was foggy.

I was lying face down somewhere.

I opened my spatial perception just enough to cover my immediate vicinity.

It was my room, just before I had passed out. The difference now was the blood-soaked floor and me collapsed on top of it.

I cautiously touched the ground. A strange sensation filled my palm. I couldn't smell, but the feeling was enough to sour my mood.

I exerted strength into my arms and slowly raised my upper body.

– Crunch

My fallen face was caked with dried, black blood.

'…What exactly is this?'

As I was trying to gather my wits, my smartwatch vibrated. Curious, I checked it and found several unread messages.

I manipulated the hologram.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Did you make it home okay? (Yesterday 19:41)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Hayul? (Yesterday 19:55)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: You must be sleeping… (Yesterday 20:23)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Sweet dreams! (Yesterday 20:23)

.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Do you remember the explanation I gave you yesterday? (Today 10:51)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Even if it's processed you need time to adapt, so if you took it yesterday or today, try not to do anything and just rest well (Today 10:51)

'Yesterday?'

I checked the current time. It was Saturday afternoon, 3 PM. I had taken the elixir around 7 PM on Friday.

…Had I been sprawled out for nearly a day? On top of a pool of blood?

I scrunched up my face and stood up.

CHAPTER 43
ELIXIR (3)

Hong Yeon-hwa stared intently at the hologram floating before her eyes.

The string of text unfolded on the hologram. Her gaze was so intense it seemed it could bore through the display, but the hologram remained unchanged.

“Staring at it won’t make the replies come any faster, Miss.”

“I know that.”

It was Saturday afternoon. In preparation for the upcoming ascent to The Tower of Growth next week, Hong Yeon-hwa was refraining from any physically taxing activities.

After a bit of light stretching, she avoided all other forms of physical training. She rested even her mind with the goal of entering the tower in peak condition.

This is why she could afford to lie sprawled on her bed, staring blankly at the hologram. Sometimes she would roll around, settle into a meditation stance, and occasionally glance back at the text history.

For Ariel, who was busy with simple household chores, the sight was enough to evoke an involuntary sigh.

Knowing why such an attitude was manifesting, especially since Hong Yeon-hwa was her charge and she took care of various errands and guard duties, Ariel understood all too well.

With a swallowed sigh, Ariel addressed Hong Yeon-hwa, who was still locked in a staring contest with the hologram.

“…If you’re so curious, why not go check on him in person?”

At Ariel’s suggestion, Hong Yeon-hwa’s shoulders twitched—a reflexive response.

Her voice quivered as she retorted.

“That’s… not really appropriate, is it? To go check if he’s taken what I gave him… Besides, he might be sleeping and can’t respond…”

“I fail to understand why the lady would engage in a futile battle of gazes with a hologram,” Ariel remarked.

“When have I ever done that?”

“Ever since you returned to the dormitory last evening, Miss.”

Hong Yeon-hwa wriggled her brows and then turned her head to bury her face in the pillow. The gesture declared her refusal to engage in further conversation, which prompted Ariel to leave the room without suppressing another sigh.

Ariel’s footsteps faded. Left alone, Hong Yeon-hwa sighed pointlessly, feeling Ariel’s presence disappear as she went to busy herself with other tasks.

A languid sunlight shone through the room. A gentle breeze also played inside, possibly because Hong Yeon-hwa had opened the window for ventilation.

The atmosphere was peaceful enough to induce an unintended drowsiness. Hong Yeon-hwa considered taking a nap as the thought crossed her mind, straightened her pillow, and laid down her head.

…The truth was, she couldn’t sleep.

Hong Yeon-hwa scrunched her face with frustration and turned over. Her cheek squished against the pillow. Annoyed, she squirmed and stealthily glanced at her smartwatch.

There were no new messages. Specifically, no texts had come from the contact she had set an alarm for.

‘Did he use it properly?’

The elixir she had given to Lee Hayul was indeed precious despite being plentiful in the clan’s storeroom, and she had mentioned it was a form of investment.

Individuals who have awakened to mana are termed superhumans.

Based on this ability, those who contribute to societal good by hunting monsters and dealing with villains are called ‘heroes.’

There is also the term ‘hunter.’ These are also superhumans, but instead of focusing on battling monsters and villains, they concentrate on exploring dungeons and other ruins.

Heroes and hunters. While many superhumans follow these two paths, not everyone does.

There are those who dislike the bloody battles, and others whose talents blossom in fields other than combat.

Alchemists are among them.

They develop and produce medicines intended for superhuman consumption, specializing in alchemy and pharmacology, a path not many superhumans choose.

Moreover, the number of individuals who excel in this field is exceedingly small.

The Gop-hwa clan has always been in a position to receive elixirs from these rare talents.

The elixir handed to Lee Hayul was one of those precious concoctions, supplied once a year for the clan’s heir to consume.

An elixir centered around the root of the Fairy Tree.

The Fairy Tree is a rare species so elusive that even if one were to accumulate virtue for three generations, finding even a branch could be considered a stroke of celestial luck.

Thanks to the deep ties with the Taesan clan from the founder’s time, the Gop-hwa clan could procure materials relatively easily, allowing them to obtain an elixir or two annually.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s unprecedent output of Gop-hwa’s power meant she didn’t need to consume all the supplied elixirs, leaving a surplus.

The efficacy was certain. Hong Yeon-hwa herself had consumed it several times and could attest to its effects.

That's why she passed it on. Considering that Lee Hayul was just beginning his growth phase, she deemed it an important period for him.

She was confident that the potent elixir would have a positive impact on his swift growth.

'…Will he appreciate it?'

As she dwelled on her cheerless inbox, a speculative future brought a faint smile to her face.

She looked forward to Lee Hayul's reaction the next time they met. What would it be? Would he be astonished by the incredible efficacy? Would he be extremely grateful to her?

"Hehe…"

Or perhaps, he would show her the same smile as before.

Filled with anticipation, Hong Yeon-hwa buried her face in the pillow and let out a chuckle.

* * *

"Ah, damn it."

My expression soured instinctively.

Feeling the foreign substance, I spat, "Ptui," and as expected, black blood splattered on the floor.

Spitting on the floor of one's home is rude and filthy, but at the moment, I couldn't care less.

The floor was already a mess with blood. Even if I spat out dozens of times, the hardened blood had taken over the floor to the extent that it would hardly make a difference.

For once, I was somewhat grateful for my lack of smell. At least I didn't have to endure the stench of filthy blood.

"Ugh…"

What in the world was this situation?

I slumped against the wall, lost in thought.

I had taken the elixir, and blood had poured from my mouth. The amount increased steadily until I finally lost consciousness, only to regain it nearly a day later.

Why? For what reason? I didn't understand…

I exhaled what would have been a sigh if it weren't for the crust of dried blood I removed from inside my mouth with a finger. It had hardened and was getting in the way of my breathing.

Even the slightest movement of my finger felt exhausting.

When I first tried to get up, I nearly fell back down. The floor wasn't as slippery as I had thought—the blood had hardened.

The problem was with my body. When I propped myself up with my arms, I was doubtful, but the moment I tried to stand, my legs nearly gave out.

My body felt heavy, as if it was saturated with water. My reactions were slow as if I had just woken up, and strength failed to surge as needed.

Just leaning against the wall was about all I could manage with such a heavy body. On the flip side, my mana was bubbling vigorously.

The capacity of mana stored in the core. Comparing the current volume to what it had been before was impossible—it had increased too greatly.

If before it was a droplet, now it was a cup full of water.

The circuits had drastically changed, too. The existing ones had doubled in thickness and breadth. Even the movement of mana, which used to be so subtle, now felt unfamiliar.

New circuits had also formed. They interwove between the existing ones, allowing for even more dense movement of mana.

Though it only felt heavy now, my body had changed.

It seemed to have been positively influenced by the process of receiving mana from the elixir.

I could only guess that this state was a backlash from the sudden growth.

The transformation was staggering. I couldn't stop marveling at the change brought on by just one elixir.

What had it been like in the original work? To be honest, I didn't know because I hadn't stopped after just one. Whether I could even compare those stats to here…

For now, I couldn't use magic. The vastly increased volume and quality of mana, the altered core and circuits.

Using mana carelessly seemed inadvisable. The recommendation to take one to two days for tuning must have meant this.

For now, I just soothed myself, letting the elixir's energy settle well within my body.

'…What was that again?'

While organizing my thoughts against the wall, I recalled the dream just before waking.

It was hard to say it "came to mind," really. Dreams are like that, but I couldn't recall the details after waking.

Only a hazy memory of a dreamlike forest and motes of light flitting about. Anything beyond that stubbornly eluded me.

'I don't understand.'

I didn't understand any of this. Is this what always happens when you take an elixir? It didn't seem likely…

I couldn't hide my bewildered feeling as I felt the information about the room through spatial perception.

A carpet of black blood had coagulated and claimed half of the floor…

"Ugh."

A sigh naturally escaped me. I wanted to just close my eyes and forget about it, but I couldn't continue to ignore the situation.

Fortunately, I could clean up this disaster easily. I had forgotten, but the dormitory was equipped with various convenience spells.

Using the embedded purification and cleanliness spells, the bloodstains adhering to the room vanished cleanly. Three cheers for magic.

Staggering, I made it to the shower and cleaned myself off. I almost dozed off under the warm water, so I quickly rinsed off the blood and got out.

I threw on a white robe I'd never worn before. The fabric was soft and cozy, especially against my bare skin.

The room, now free of the bloodstains, had the window left open for fresh air. I couldn't smell due to my sealed sense but still felt a mild discomfort.

Ever since the moment with Professor Atra, I wondered how I could feel such discomfort.

Both Professor Atra and Liana had been drinking the night before, but they had cleaned up and used spells like the bleach spell to erase any scent.

How my body knew and reacted to it was a mystery.

'I'll think about it later.'

Thinking too hard made my head hurt. I was also starting to feel warm. I dragged my legs to the living room sofa.

I didn't want to sleep in a room that, while odorless to me, still felt unpleasant.

After grabbing a suitable blanket, I collapsed onto the sofa. Covered by the blanket, it turned into a decent makeshift bed.

'Let's just sleep a bit… '

I had been out for a day, but the fatigue lingered. Sleep is the best medicine when you're ill, they say. I'll just sleep a bit and then think more on this…

…

– Ding-dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

Just as my consciousness was about to break, an alarm went off. It was a persistent alarm.

"Ah."

I scowled and tapped on my smartwatch. I was about to fall asleep, and now this incessant alarm…

The hologram floated up.

[Monday AM 6:40]

A strange message was displayed. I scratched my head and checked my spatial perception. After making sure there were no issues, I interpreted the hologram again.

Monday, morning, 6:40 AM.

Monday… the day of the climb to The Tower of Growth.

'Uh… '

Was I experiencing hallucinations through spatial perception? Or was I still dreaming? Was my smartwatch broken?

I fell into deep contemplation.

The alarm, oblivious to the mood, continued unabated. The reality of the situation

was quickly setting in.

Without proper preparation over the weekend…

The day of the ascent to The Tower of Growth had dawned.

CHAPTER 44
THE ASCENT TO THE TOWER

Shio-ram is situated smack dab in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean. The entire artificial island created by Principal Neriel serves as the grounds for Shio-ram.

About half of the site is dedicated to dungeons maintained and managed for the training of the cadets.

The other half is taken up by commercial areas that inevitably form where people gather, educational facilities for the cadets, with the remainder being vacant land.

“Phew…”

A deep sigh escaped me involuntarily.

Clutching onto my frayed nerves after a vanished weekend, I stepped out of the dormitory.

A short ride on the campus bus and I arrived at the central plaza.

In the midst of Shio-ram, the central plaza may take up a small percentage of the whole area, but once you’re there, it’s hard to grasp the sheer expanse of it.

Even if I stretched my spatial perception to its limits, I couldn’t contain its vastness, which branched out into the main roads leading to the different zones for each school year.

And right there in the center of the plaza stood a massive ivory tower.

So wide that multiple soccer fields combined would not measure up, the tower seemed to pierce through the clouds and strike the sky.

“…The Tower of Growth.”

The last gate phenomenon was the manifestation of The Tower of Space.

I wondered if sensing The Tower of Growth would lead to an incident like before, so I swept the tower with radar spatial perception which I don't normally use anymore.

Thankfully, nothing extraordinary happened. Or should I say, it was unreadable. It felt like tapping a solid stone wall with my fist.

On one side of the spacious plaza, numerous cadets gathered under the guidance of their professors.

The total number of first-year students was over 500, wasn't it?

Feeling the bustling presence, I headed towards Professor Liana's energy signature.

I arrived where the familiar presence was felt.

[▼Ipchun class, this way▼]

Below the billboard-sized hologram stood Professor Liana. She had enlarged the hologram projected from her smartwatch.

She was clad in a robe, similar to the ones she always wore. Familiar presences clustered around her.

I moved slowly. Thanks to practically passing out over the weekend, my body was almost back to normal.

But still, I could feel something bubbling inside me. It seemed like I hadn't fully absorbed the elixir yet.

"Good morning."

"Hi~"

"Hello."

[Good morning to you all.]

As I moved towards the Ipchun class group, cadets I recognized greeted me.

I had received many greetings on the first day, but now there was a noticeable

increase in warmth.

It seems familiarity had grown from sharing classes and brushing elbows, especially since stories spread from the last sparring session and dungeon practice.

There were surely still those who talked behind my back, but that wasn't something I could deal with.

"Ah, you're here."

Among the gathered Ipchun class cadets were Elia, Atila, and Aidan.

Atila, who was indifferently tapping on his smartwatch, waved his hand, and Aidan, upon seeing me, nodded awkwardly.

"It's funny to ask after just a week, but have you been well?"

[Yes, I've been fine.]

Nothing much, just a couple of minor incidents.

Like suddenly fainting due to a childhood trauma, or choking on my own blood after ingesting an elixir.

Ultimately, one was resolved well… and the other is currently being addressed.

[Atila, have you been okay?]

"Yes. I've been fine."

Atila shifted his gaze away. Aidan, who had been looked at, awkwardly turned his head.

Why are they acting like this… Oh, right.

[Can I ask how the sparring went?]

"Ah, that—"

"That guy got his ass whooped."

Aidan choked, his shoulders shrinking. That seemed to explain why he had been looking so downcast.

“I held my own for a while, but I conceded the decisive hit. The flow was similar to when I sparred with you, Hayul… Idiot.”

“Ugh…”

“Talking big about showing the superiority of the sword and then… Idiot.”

“Cough…”

Aidan crumbled under the sharp criticism. Calling him an idiot… seemed a bit harsh… right? I’m not sure. I guess they’re close, so they tease each other like that.

Anyway.

“……”

[Good morning.]

Elia’s reaction was unmistakable. After approaching and greeting me, she stared at my face and cocked her head in confusion.

[Is there something on my face?]

“No, no. Nothing’s on your face.”

Nothing seemed amiss when I checked with spatial perception.

“It’s just… um… hard to explain. You seem different somehow…”

Elia herself wasn’t sure, shaking her head in doubt.

‘Is it because of the elixir?’

If there were a reason for change, it would probably be the elixir.

After a brief chat with the three of them, I headed towards Professor Liana. I figured I should at least mark my attendance.

“Alright, gather here… Huh?”

As I approached, Professor Liana finally seemed to notice and turned her head. But her reaction was not what I expected.

I thought I’d receive a warm welcome, but instead, she stared at my face blankly and blinked. She scanned my body from head to toe, her head tilting in puzzlement.

“…Eh?”

Her reaction was clearly one of confusion.

Then, still staring at me dumbfounded, Professor Liana reached out and grabbed my cheeks. My lips pouted out like a fish.

Then suddenly, she brought her face close to mine.

“Sniff, sniff…”

‘?’

She started sniffing me, particularly around my neck. The tickling sensation made me shrink back.

When I stood frozen in bewilderment, Professor Liana finally lifted her head, her face still full of questions.

The surrounding cadets were also looking over, whispering among themselves.

It wasn’t just Ipchun class here.

The other five classes, Usu, Gyeongchip, Chunbun, Cheongmyeong, and Gogu, were also present. Some of their gazes were pulled in this direction too.

“Eh…?”

[Why did you do that?]

“Uh… Ah… Sorry. I wasn’t in my right mind.”

Her actions made no sense to me. When I asked via the hologram, Professor Liana shook her head, still looking confused.

After a moment, she apologized, saying she was sorry. I merely nodded, still not understanding what had happened.

"……"

"……"

After marking my attendance with Professor Liana, I returned to my spot. Elia had stepped away for a bit, leaving me with Aidan and Atila, who were throwing me lost glances.

They exchanged an awkward conversation, and I stayed silent without giving an explanation.

…

…

…

"Alberth Kaniazel, the professor in charge of Gogu class, will explain the details of the ascent."

A stout middle-aged man climbed onto a temporary podium.

Despite his age, his slicked-back golden hair brimmed with vitality, and the scars scattered across his face hinted at a not-so-easy past.

As his spirited speech continued, I glanced around with an embarrassed expression.

Right next to me stood Hong Yeon-hwa, her presence unmistakable. With her arms crossed, her indifferent eyes gazing at the podium, it didn't feel like a good sign.

"Ah…"

After being sniffed by Professor Liana, I recalled the weekend's events the moment I sensed Hong Yeon-hwa enter the range of my folded-back spatial perception.

Right after coming to consciousness on Saturday, I remember checking my texts, meaning to reply after getting up for a bit, but I completely neglected to do so.

And just now, in a panic about possibly being late, I rushed out without finding time to respond.

That was my situation. From Hong Yeon-hwa's perspective, after being given such a precious elixir and then being ignored, she must have been quite upset.

The thought of being disliked by Hong Yeon-hwa made my head spin. Just moments ago, I was full of thoughts about the ascent, but now they had all but evaporated.

[I'm sorry I didn't reply. It's no excuse, but I was asleep all weekend after taking the elixir.]

I couldn't stay silent forever. I shrank the hologram and cautiously displayed it to Hong Yeon-hwa.

[I'm sorry.]

Hong Yeon-hwa glanced at the hologram and her lips twitched.

"…Phew."

After staring at the hologram for a moment, Hong Yeon-hwa exhaled deeply and reached out to poke my cheek.

The gesture felt positive, and my face brightened up immediately.

"Heh."

Hong Yeon-hwa let out a resigned chuckle and kept poking my cheek.

With a guilty conscience, and feeling somewhat pleased, I allowed my cheek to be fiddled with.

After a while, Hong Yeon-hwa inquired.

"Hayul, what was that about with the professor just now?"

‘Just now?’

Pondering what could have prompted that question, I realized she was referring to Professor Liana’s recent odd behavior.

[I’m not sure myself.]

“Really?”

Hong Yeon-hwa made a curious face, then leaned in to sniff my neck. The light breaths tickled me, causing my shoulders to contract.

“It smells nice, though.”

“Maybe you should keep the displays of affection outside the dorms,”

Ignoring Baek Ahrin’s muttered comment with a disgusted face, Hong Yeon-hwa lifted her head.

‘No smell of blood, then.’

I was worried that the scent of blood would linger after being surrounded by a pool of it for nearly a day. Thankfully, it seemed the cleansing and purifying spells I’d cast were effective.

“Did you take the elixir? How do you feel?”

[I was tired right after taking it, but now I’m feeling okay.]

“Good to hear. The elixir was supposed to be stabilized by processing, but it’s relieving to hear it directly from you.”

…Hm. So the elixir was safe after all… Then what was with me? But then again, my body has always been a strange sort from the previous world.

As we exchanged small talk, the professor on the podium finished his speech and began the detailed explanation.

Professor Alberth Kaniazel’s voice captivated the cadets as he spoke.

“Shortly, the cadets will enter The Tower of Growth. This ascent aims for survival amid the tower’s hostile environment and threats posed by monsters and fellow cadets.”

The Tower of Growth.

The expansive ivory tower at the center of Shio-ram, the reason for the academy’s existence.

Not only does The Tower of Growth offer its blessings, but the benefits of entering the tower are comparable.

Both in the original work and here, it is commonly referred to simply as “the ascent.”

The ascent is an event that greatly influences the current iteration’s stat increase.

In the first iteration, the lack of knowledge meant almost everything was problematic, but the ascent event getting thoroughly messed up meant that the growth curve did too.

Especially the first ascent is a critical event. To get the Snowball rolling, one must gain a lot from here.

However, I couldn’t manage that in the first iteration.

“The ascent will last for five days, during which direct combat and competition among the cadets are permitted. If a cadet sustains an injury deemed life-threatening, they will be disqualified and moved to a separate training room to spend the remaining time.”

I failed because of that competition.

Being a special admission student, whether I liked it or not, I was the focus of attention. In the tower’s interior, could anyone actually compete on the same level as a special admission student?

Like Aidan’s case, there were plenty who would directly confront me. And now, with other classes mixed in, there would be even more.

And then…

“This ascent’s scores will be represented by the points earned from defeating monsters and fellow cadets.”

As the professor tapped his smartwatch, a large hologram sprang up, visible from all sides for everyone to see.

▸Scoring◂

[8th-tier monster: 1 point]

[7th-tier monster: 10 points]

…

[Basic sub-major cadet: 20 points]

…

[Advanced combat-major cadet: 100 points]

…

[Class vice-representative: 450 points]

[Class representative: 500 points]

…

A score chart appeared for monsters and cadets based on rank and major. It somehow reminded me of a butcher shop menu with its detailed breakdown.

I felt a strange sensation as I checked the very end of the hologram.

At the very bottom.

[Special admission: 1,000 points]

…Hm.

I pondered and then nodded. With such a score, it was obvious I’d be a target. There

were ample reasons, both emotional and practical.

I sighed internally and carefully removed the smartwatch from my left wrist.

Smartwatches couldn't be brought into the tower. The same went for other equipment. You could only bring along your primary weapon.

In other words, without the hologram function of my smartwatch, I transitioned from being a temporarily mute person to a mute person altogether.

It was a regrettable situation. The thought of temporarily parting with my smartwatch, which had become part of me, filled me with deep gloom.

Fortunately, Professor Liana assured me that I could bring my arm covers. I was relieved not to expose my ghastly scars amidst the bustling crowd.

"Gogu class will enter first."

The ascent was now right before us.

"Gogu (Grain Rain), enter!"

I swallowed hard and fidgeted with my awkward wrist.

…

…

…

"Cheongmyeong (Clear and Bright), enter!"

The ivory tower's size was majestic. At its base was an arch-shaped entrance, as dark as a starless night sky.

"Chunbun (Vernal Equinox), enter!"

The entrance began with the later classes like Gogu class entering at five-minute intervals. The cadets lined up and entered the tower as scheduled.

“Gyeongchip (Awakening of Insects), enter!”

While there was a gap between entrance times, time inside the tower varied by only a few seconds. This meant there was no advantage based on the order of entry.

“Usu (Rain Water), enter!”

Once inside the tower, as soon as you open your eyes, the test begins. That moment marks the start of five days of survival.

“Ipchun (Start of Spring), enter!”

Soon it was Ipchun class’s turn. Cadets from Ipchun class started to move in order.

Among the last of the Ipchun class, Hong Yeon-hwa paused to watch before turning her head.

“What are you going to do?”

Next to her stood Baek Ahrin. Playing with her hair and wearing a measured smile, Baek Ahrin glanced over.

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“Hmm…”

Baek Ahrin hummed thoughtfully, her fingers ceasing their twirling in her hair. Her aquatic hued strands fell over her shoulder.

“I have something in mind.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, I can’t tell you that. It’s a competition after all.”

“Tsk.”

Hong Yeon-hwa clicked her tongue and turned away. Baek Ahrin giggled softly,

watching the tower's entrance, where the cadets were steadily entering.

Just then, the entering cadet was the special admission student, Lee Hayul. He looked tense as he threw himself into the gateway.

"…I have a plan."

Whether it would work or not remained to be seen.

Baek Ahrin let out a small chuckle.

…

…

…

Life seldom goes as planned. The world just isn't like that. If everything went as thought, there would be no unhappy people.

It's a fact I'm quite aware of.

I smiled broadly, inhaling what I presumed would be air filled with the essence of nature.

But.

'Why, why can't I see anything again?'

Where the hell did my spatial perception go?

CHAPTER 45
THE BLIND MUTE

In a vast space engulfed by darkness.

The only sources of light were the numerous holograms floating in the air.

These holograms displayed crucial areas inside The Tower of Growth where the first-year students had just entered.

“It’s already been a year. Time flies.”

Around the table, holograms radiated light, and the attendees encircled it.

In the silence, everyone focused on the holograms; a languid voice echoed through the room.

It was Lee Suyeon, the professor in charge of the first-year Usu class.

Twirling the ends of her wavy purple hair, she stretched her arms with a slack expression.

“I remember it was just a few days ago when they first entered as freshmen.”

“You say that, but nothing about you has changed in a year.”

“People don’t usually change much within a year.”

Lee Suyeon grimaced, not quite shaking off her lethargy, and massaged her shoulders.

“The difficulty seems a bit higher than last year, doesn’t it?”

“It’s based on the average of the students. This year’s average has increased significantly, so the difficulty was adjusted.”

Suyeon, not a new professor but in her first year of charge, had little knowledge to go on.

Albert, who had overseen the Gogu class for the past decade or so, responded.

Several other professors, listening to Suyeon and Albert, nodded inwardly too.

Lately, the basic level of students has increased significantly. This trend has continued for a few years, and especially this cohort has been highly praised as one of the golden generations in Shio-ram's history.

The first ascent for the first-year students had always taken place on the 'first floor' of The Tower of Growth. This tradition had never changed.

The theme was survival, the environment an expansive forest teeming with monsters.

A five-day survival ordeal in a forest swarming with monsters, armed with only one's primary weapon.

During the last dungeon practice, preparation was allowed. Survival gear was permitted, and somewhat combat-supportive items were acceptable.

However, this survival trial was different.

They were thrown into the forest with only their primary weapon. No other preparations were allowed. Now, they had to survive for five days in this penniless state.

And amidst the monsters, even more dangerous was the competition with other students.

The difficulty was undeniably higher than the dungeon practice, and even more so than last year.

But that wasn't what Suyeon was referring to.

"Weren't they 6th-tier creatures last year?"

"Yes, last year it was the 6th-tier alpha entity 'Earthstone Treant'."

Cheongmyeong's professor, Johannes, confirmed after checking the records.

On the third day of the five-day survival on the first floor of The Tower of Growth, a central area would spawn a special monster.

This monster, offering a substantial amount of points, was a target for the students, promoting cooperative competition.

It was the same case last year.

The Earthstone Treant. A 6th-tier monster. As the name suggests, an amalgamation of soil, stone, and wood constructed its golem-like body.

"Last year… haha. Surprisingly, a single student defeated it."

Last year, that kind of monster was subdued by just one person.

"Taesan's Lee Jiyoon, wasn't it? It was quite the talk of the academy. I heard she overwhelmed it with brute force."

"To crush a golem, known for its regeneration and durability, head-on… It was absurd when I heard it."

The 6th-tier alpha.

Considering the monster classification from the 1st to the 8th-tier, the 6th-tier resides in the lower ranks.

At a glance, someone might think it's a weaker monster, but that's a grave mistake.

The 6th-tier represents the level of a boss in a 4th-grade dungeon.

The lowest class of superhumans and soldiers who enter just to subdue a 4th-grade dungeon can be annihilated by the appearance of a boss.

The 6th-tier. An entity that even capable academy students find challenging to engage with.

"Yes, it was 6th-tier last year. But why this year…"

Suyeon pointed to a section of the document.

[Deployed Monster: 5th-tier Alpha 'Parasitic Moth']

"A 5th-tier? And it's an alpha?"

The difficulty was higher. The overall environment was similar, but the rank of the boss creature deployed was different.

"Last year, a 6th-tier was subdued by a single student."

"Do we need to raise the difficulty because of that? That was Taesan's heir acting alone, and no matter how high the average is…"

"This year's freshmen include the heirs of Gop-hwa and Changhae, and with other students cooperating, it shouldn't be too difficult. Moreover, Hong Yeon-hwa has a case of defeating a 5th-tier on her own, doesn't she?"

His point was valid.

Suyeon nodded, then as if suddenly remembering something, she changed the subject.

"That's a point, but doesn't it put Lee Hayul at a considerable disadvantage?"

Lee Hayul. The mentioned name drew the attention of the professors who hadn't participated in the conversation.

Cheongmyeong's professor Johannes asked back.

"A disadvantage? There are no special restrictions imposed on him."

"It's not about restrictions. I'm talking about the points."

Suyeon flicked her fingers. The hologram expanded into the air from all directions.

[Special Admission: 1,000 points]

"It's too blatant. It's like an open call to target him."

“How could we possibly know the principal’s intention?”

Suyeon frowned. She couldn’t fathom the principal’s reasoning.

The special admissions student. Ever since the confirmation, rumors swirled, and after observing his growth rate and evaluations during sparring and dungeon practice, he was deemed to have ‘potential.’

I understand he has potential, but why offer such an astronomical amount of points before he even blossoms?

Suyeon pondered for a moment then turned her gaze. In the direction was Liana, the professor in charge of the Ipchun class to which the special admissions student belonged.

She would have her thoughts about her student, Lee Hayul. Suyeon intended to ask her opinion.

“……”

Normally, Professor Liana had a very good reputation. Known for always responding with a kind smile.

But there she was, unusually absent-minded, staring blankly into space.

Something wasn’t quite right. And, come to think of it, there had just been an absurd rumor about her among the students.

What was it, that she had teased a male student by smelling him? Utter nonsense. Surely, those spreading such rumors would face significant consequences.

Regardless, Liana didn’t seem to be in a normal state.

Suyeon, with her lips pursed again, shifted her gaze slightly to the side.

Nearby, though not a first-year professor, there was someone else present.

The sharp golden eyes were striking, and despite being concealed, the ferocity of her mana presence was palpable.

It was Professor Atra, responsible for the specialized lectures of the special admissions student. As his assigned teacher, she too had entered the discussion.

“What do you think, Professor Atra?”

Suyeon and Atra were not well acquainted. They had only exchanged greetings a few times at informal gatherings of professors.

Suyeon asked. Atra, who had been resting her chin on the back of her hand while watching the hologram, glanced over.

What is your opinion? She had heard all of the prior conversation and understood the question.

“……”

Atra reflected on recent events. While her life had not been long, the recent past was certainly one of the most intense periods.

Their first meeting. The unimpressive skills and growth rate.

Then, day by day, the astonishingly steep increase in growth rate and the blossoming of talents in various areas.

Always diligently following without resorting to shortcuts, an attitude that, although it must have held doubts, seemed pure in its conviction.

And then the dungeon practice—

– Wretch… Hurl!

His disgusted reaction upon seeing her.

An unwelcome memory. Atra bit her lip. Suppressing the surge of emotion, she voiced her thoughts.

“Well…”

Based on the average of the students she had observed recently,

And judging by her experience teaching Lee Hayul so far.

“He won’t just be a victim.”

Lee Hayul was far from a weak link in this examination.

He was already a superhuman in the midst of blossoming.

…

…

…

Lately, nothing has been going my way.

It was so in the previous world, and it’s the same here.

My life has always been plagued by mediocre misfortune.

Not overwhelmingly hopeless, but enough to break the ladder of hope every time.

– Whoosh

The wind brushed past. It carried a strangely cool chill.

I comforted my instinctively shivering body and burrowed deeper into a reclusive spot.

Blindly, after losing my sight, I barely found this place, crawling on the ground.

A relatively low area with rocks interlocking in such a way that there was a suitable crevice to hide.

After squeezing myself inside, I covered the entrance with large branches I had prepared earlier. With a few layers in place, basic concealment should be achieved.

A touch of magic on top, and it makes for a decent hideout.

‘……’

After steadying my breath, I tried to expand my spatial perception.

…

I couldn't do it. It was like being pinned under a boulder; it twitched, but I just couldn't spread it out properly.

My spatial perception, which had served as my eyes, was gone. And my smartwatch, which had fulfilled the role of speech, was also gone. Now, on my wrist was only a test watch that served to tally points.

'What do I do now.'

It feels like I've already failed from the start.

The first ascent, the first ordeal. Whatever you call it doesn't matter.

This event is the proverbial player-harassing event.

Competition among students is permitted.

For those who already look down on the special admissions student, it's a golden opportunity, and even those merely curious might take a jab in such a setting.

And there are tangible benefits.

A thousand points hanging around the neck of the special admission.

The points earned during the ascent count towards your grade and serve as a currency of sorts.

Accumulate enough points, and later you can exchange them for items listed in the Shio-ram catalogs.

One thing's for sure; capturing the special admissions student's 1,000 points would yield many benefits. Even if it's not enough on its own, having it would never be a disadvantage.

Most likely.

Right now, many students are probably scouring the area, eyes alight, looking for me.

'Ah… '

I rubbed my face and sighed.

I tried looking up, feeling claustrophobic. Nothing was visible.

My sight was sealed; I couldn't see. Even if I had spatial perception, its range wouldn't allow me to see the sky.

Even with sight, the leaves would obscure the sky.

I couldn't see above.

My head drooped with despair.

CHAPTER 46
THE TOWER OF GROWTH (1)

The Tower of Growth's interior is so vast and varied that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it a world unto itself.

During their four-year stint at Shio-ram, cadets can safely undergo various trials through The Tower of Growth.

The first ascent that freshmen face is almost too mild to be called a trial.

It's an environment reminiscent of the forests from the age of dinosaurs, common in online searches. The air inhaled is heavy, and the trees are thick.

The leaves splayed across the branches are so expansive that they could make a garment for a person to wear.

…Though not visible to my eyes, it's probably the case.

The plan was this.

The concentration of mana here is immensely dense. It is incomparable to the outside world and even to the dungeons entered before.

The trees and grass, which grew year-round on such mana, are the same.

The weeds that are abundant here are magical herbs, difficult to find outside because they contain mana.

The goal was to collect everything necessary. For others, it might be challenging, but with my spatial perception, it was a simple task.

Positive growth obtained within the tower applies outside as well, and one can take out items gained here.

I roamed around collecting herbs and also sought out the location of Hidden Pieces.

If it's like the original work, there should be a chance of finding Hidden Pieces around here.

The herbs were to be sold or used by me if I decided to delve into alchemy later on.

I planned to survive the five days like this. Intending to hide my presence and avoid other students, occasionally dealing with magic casually.

I've been told I have a faint presence, making it hard for others to find me. Additionally, I have spatial perception, allowing me to detect others' approaches and traces beforehand. I believed this plan to be feasible.

The foundation of the plan, my spatial perception, has disappeared.

Cramped between large rocks, I blankly operated my spatial perception.

It felt like my mind was breaking. I truly hated the world.

Part of me just wanted to lie down and rest, but that would be the worst choice of all.

I mustered my will and did my best to restore my spatial perception.

It felt like hours had passed. My spatial perception remained crushed, unable to exert much power, akin to my current plight.

'Haah… '

Looking at my condition, it seemed impossible to easily regain my spatial perception.

'…What about food?'

Surviving five days naturally meant emergency rations were not allowed. I had to find food and water directly from the forest.

Without spatial perception, it's… difficult.

I could somehow manage water with magic.

To obtain food here, I could either catch edible monsters or chew on tree fruits or the roots of herbs.

Even if I managed to find tree fruits while groping around in hiding, it's hard to tell if they are poisonous or edible.

Invisible to the eye. Indiscernible by smell or taste. Ultimately, I'd have to try eating something and see how my body reacts.

I couldn't just sit still and do nothing.

I carefully stood up. Pushing aside the leaves skillfully obscuring the crevices, I cautiously emerged.

Taking careful steps, wary of laying myself open to attack, I felt around.

– Thud

'Ugh!'

I banged my head several times against thick branches.

– Crack

'Woah, woah… '

I tripped over protruding tree roots and almost fell, roughly four times.

– Plunk

'Ouch.'

While feeling the tree, I was pricked dozens of times by something sharp. If spatial perception is restored, I'll likely find numerous marks on my palms.

Hearing is the only remaining sense I could call functional. A myriad of sounds seeped into my ears.

The sound of footsteps. My own steps as I walked. Sometimes, I heard movements that weren't mine.

Whenever that happened, I swiftly hid in some place suitable, or if there was nowhere to hide, I would lie flat and kill my presence.

I hid my presence until the others' moved away. Once they were far enough, I slowly got up and began to feel around again.

This process repeated several times. Hours hiding in the rock crevices, then hours feeling around, trying to find something, anything.

I managed to gather a few tree fruits (presumably) and found a large clearing and a riverside.

During that time, I tried to stimulate my spatial perception. There was no good news.

I'm not sure if this is the right analogy, but the space around here is too heavy. I couldn't push it back to widen my range.

'There's no answer.'

Struggling with the tree fruits I had found, I pondered my next move.

I hadn't yet determined if they were poisonous. I mashed up one fruit and applied it to my wrist, as I remembered reading somewhere.

If a stinging sensation occurs, it's poison, so the saying goes. Luckily, no reaction came with time.

I cautiously held a piece of the fruit in my mouth. No pain ensued. So I ate the fruit slowly, giving time between each bite.

Much of the first day had already slipped away.

'Sheesh… '

It was time to make a decision. Continuing like this would achieve nothing. Spatial perception had become useless, and I, its owner, had become a blind fool.

There was no benefit in continuing to struggle through life like this.

I couldn't gather herbs, and finding Hidden Pieces was out of the question. Thanks to the enhanced blessings of growth, I could feel myself continuing to grow just by breathing.

But in this case, it might be better to fail the test and get disqualified early, ending up in the training room.

After returning to the rock crevice without any significant achievements, I absent-mindedly tapped on spatial perception, and once again, numerous sounds reached my ears.

'…Sounds.'

With the curse of sensory sealing, I had lost sight, taste, and smell. More than half of my five senses had vanished, leaving only hearing and touch.

Since I was cursed, I've felt my hearing and touch improve. I was now picking up subtle noises that I wouldn't have heard normally.

The sound of the wind blowing, the rustle of grass bending under its force, the swaying of branches, the flow of water, the chirping of small birds…

Barely holding onto my crumbling mental state, I simply felt the sounds. My sharply improved hearing caught all kinds of noise.

My hearing had improved. I hadn't paid it much attention. I heard that if you close your eyes, the energy that goes into sight spreads to other organs.

Whether that's true or not, I felt it, so I believed it.

'…It's too clear.'

But now, I could hear too well.

More and more sounds entered my ears. I could hear almost all the noises from the forest.

Maybe it's because the energy that would have gone into spatial perception is now spreading to other senses.

Come to think of it, my hearing was always good. Even in the previous world.

While my body was weak overall, with my sight blurry, my ears were the only organ that functioned normally.

Feeling gazes with touch. It was odd to sense such things not with intuition but with touch, but my hearing was keen, and I sensed gazes even better here than on Earth.

'Mana.'

I could feel mana. Although it was difficult to distinguish in detail due to the abundance of mana around me, various forms of mana transmitted through my skin and senses.

The vibrant mana lingering in trees, the evident mana in weeds, the flow of mana coursing through the soil, the mana flowing even in the air.

Primarily, the mana was blue and clear, emanating life and the essence of nature…

I felt it even without spatial perception.

Thinking about it.

I had always sensed mana through spatial perception.

Since when? No, I had always felt mana through spatial perception.

Even as a child, when my vision was blurry and poor, I eventually saw.

After being cursed, the world completely engulfed by darkness was terrifying.

So I depended on the unstable spatial perception, which was similar to the blurry world I was used to seeing, and relied even more on it once spatial perception normalized.

Spatial perception was all-encompassing.

I figured out a lot about spatial perception.

The reason I could recognize a book without opening it was because I received all the information from the space within range.

I didn't need to open the book because it exists in that space. Ultimately, by recognizing the entire space, the contents of the book come with it.

I also perceived mana that way. Mana exists on top of space after all.

Hearing and touch strangely improved after I lost sight, taste, and smell. I hadn't paid proper attention to them because I relied on spatial perception.

I relied on spatial perception. That might be an understatement. Like people see the world with their eyes, I felt the world with spatial perception instead of eyes.

Humans depend on sight, I depended on spatial perception.

But I had more than just that.

Affinity to mana, versatility, enhanced physical abilities from becoming a superhuman, and oddly improved hearing and touch…

I had many things to use, perhaps I had been too fixated on spatial perception.

'……'

It was an odd thought.

Now that I had already failed, I thought of giving it a proper try.

With a deep breath, I momentarily set aside my thoughts on spatial perception.

I retracted the frantically struggling spatial perception.

A sensation sprung up as if that energy spread in all directions.

– Whoosh

The wind blew in. It seeped through the gaps not covered by leaves and brushed my skin.

I heard the wind before it entered the gap. I felt it on my skin before the wind touched it.

I also felt the mana that followed the wind. Mana was abundant on the ground where I sat, on the rock I leaned against, and on the surrounding plants.

I opened my senses. Most superhumans do. They use enhanced vision, hearing, and touch to read attacks and fit their own in.

Until now, I had been doing that with spatial perception. With my sight gone, I trusted spatial perception more than hearing and touch.

I recognized the world through sounds. I understood my surroundings through touch. I read the form and nature of mana.

Spatial perception may have become useless, but the proficiency gained from using it hadn't disappeared.

I drew a map in my head. I gathered various pieces of information to sketch a crude map, even though it was now empty.

Before I knew it, I had forgotten hunger. Thirst was tackled long ago, so there was no threat to my life.

The remnants of the elixir still clumped somewhere in my body. The energy, yet to be fully absorbed, squirmed in response.

Continuously, I opened my senses and felt around. I drew a map with the information I had gathered.

…

…

…

– Thump

Footsteps.

That sound pierced through my concentration.

Especially that set of footsteps approached quite distinctly. Right now, I'm sitting quietly in the rock crevice. It's not my presence.

Many other presences could be heard. My increasingly intense hearing captured

more sounds than I could have imagined.

– Thump, thump, thump

–… Huh?… there

Those footsteps… no, now footsteps were coming this way. Faint voices also reached me.

Just like during the last swordsmanship lecture, when Aidan's footsteps came straight towards me among many, it was the same now.

'Did I get caught?'

I thought I had been hiding my presence well. Occasionally, I even employed magic to move around.

But in the end, with my sight like this, I couldn't properly check what traces I had left.

The approaching presences seemed to be roughly three. Among them could be someone with sensory abilities or a student trained in tracking.

Either way, it seemed I had been caught.

Should I run?

For a moment, I considered it, but then shook my head immediately.

Realistically, it's difficult to escape. If I tried now, they'd already have a lock on my location. It wouldn't be long before they caught up.

Even if I did run, not just them but many other students were targeting me. There was no telling how long I could keep running, and there was nothing to gain from it anyway.

'…… '

There was no particular resolve.

I stood up. I didn't bother hiding my presence anymore. The movements I heard grew more urgent.

This wasn't a good place for a fight. I moved towards a clearing I remembered.

Unlike the wary steps I had been taking so far,

My stride was now surprisingly stable.

CHAPTER 47
THE TOWER OF GROWTH (2)

Three figures cut through the dense forest. One of them, urgently, opened their mouth.

It was Lorraine, a support major with an inherent ability in detection.

“She’s moving.”

“Escaping?”

“No, the pace is slow. It seems like a lure.”

The one who responded to the report was Kim Hyun, a combat major student. He adjusted the sword at his waist as he moved.

“A lure, huh… Could there be a trap?”

“Maybe.”

Kim Hyun’s party, consisting of three, had formed a temporary alliance to seek out the special admission student, Lee Hayul.

Within the tower, competition among cadets was allowed. However, this did not prevent cooperation among them if needed.

Combat majors Kim Hyun and Raven, along with Lorraine, who was a support major with detection abilities, had formed their party based on individual motives.

Of course, there was no ill intent towards Lee Hayul from anyone.

Kim Hyun was merely curious about the abilities of the much-talked-about special admission student. He wanted to test his skills against him and seized the opportunity to act.

Raven and Lorraine aimed for Lee Hayul for the points they would gain from catching the special admission student.

A whopping 1,000 points. It's the score you'd get for capturing the highest rank twice. Even split three ways, it's more than 300 points each. There was no reason not to aim for it.

"Lucky… I think. It seems we're the first to find him."

Though Lorraine was a detection specialist, finding traces of the special admission student was nothing more than luck.

Inherently, detection abilities are not so convenient.

They consume a lot of mental energy every time they are used, and in an environment with such a high concentration of mana, it is even more so.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't the detection ability that found him, but rather a tracking of the traces left on nearby trees and ground.

It was fortunate, as Kim Hyun's party was indeed aiming for the special admission student.

"We're right on top of him."

At Lorraine's words, the other two tensed up and gripped their weapons tighter.

They entered a clearing beyond the thick underbrush.

* * *

The last adjustments to my senses were made.

On the verge of battle. Thankfully, I wasn't too nervous.

It was thanks to Professor Atra's teachings to keep my mind calm and collected.

– Rustle

The presence of my pursuers entered the clearing.

Lee Hayul turned his head in that direction.

This time, he gauged his opponents with mana. It felt awkward, but his mana affinity helped see through the nature and total amount of his adversary's mana.

"One has relatively weak mana. A support major, perhaps. The other two seem like combat majors. They appear quite skilled."

I couldn't make any detailed judgments. Even this could be a misjudgment.

As Lee Hayul remained silent, the three who had entered the clearing tightened their grip on their weapons.

'…… '

Though his eyes were closed, Kim Hyun in the lead was certain that Lee Hayul could identify him properly.

Raven, who was gripping his spear, spoke first.

"I'm Raven, a combat major. No hard feelings, but even though it's 3-on-1, I just wanted to fight."

"I'm Lorraine, a support major."

"I'm Kim Hyun, a combat major. I would like to hear your name."

Kim Hyun, out of courtesy, also named himself and drew his sword. It was a formality he always observed when dueling in his family's household.

He was from what could be called a prestigious family, where it was natural to observe decorum before dueling.

As his words ended, Raven, who was aiming his spear, turned to Kim Hyun with a look of shock, as if staring at a madman.

"Hey, hey."

"?!"

Kim Hyun tilted his head at his friend's bewildered voice, then suddenly shivered. The rumors about Lee Hayul, particularly those involving 'speech,' were well-known.

"…I apologize. I have been rude."

"……"

Although Lee Hayul couldn't see the comedy unfold, he understood the situation. Usually unfazed due to his smartwatch, he was rather nonplussed now.

He nodded politely and drew his sword.

It was a signal to end the conversation.

– Swish

Lee Hayul drew the sword from his waist. The clear ringing of the sword being drawn elicited an internal admiration from Kim Hyun.

It was a standard issue sword. Nothing special, but he sensed a well-honed posture in the way the sword was drawn.

He was skilled. The posture was unlike that of a superhuman who had awakened less than a month ago.

Kim Hyun heightened his tension, gripping the sword firmly. He tapped his inner core, drawing forth mana.

'I will not be careless.'

Lee Hayul's past duels were already widely known. Even if the opponent was careless, he had defeated a student majoring in combat.

He was no different from a superhuman. A slight competitive spirit arose, a natural emotion for anyone who prided themselves as a swordsman.

Just as he was about to charge in with a deep breath, Lee Hayul raised a hand and pointed at Kim Hyun.

'What?'

A sudden action.

Before he could question it, a chilling intuition caused Kim Hyun to immediately raise his sword, wrapping Qi around the blade.

– Whoosh!

Lowest-level magic

[Mana Slash]

The intuition was correct. A powerful slashing force tore through the ground towards him. It was too late to dodge; Kim Hyun hastily raised his sword.

– Crashing!

“Ugh…!”

The slashing force, which tore away chunks of Qi, made Kim Hyun’s eyes bulge.

Using magic. He had heard the rumors, of course.

But not like this.

With such speed and power in a shadowless spear technique. He hadn’t imagined it would be this formidable.

Scratching, his legs skidded across the ground, and ultimately he was lifted off his feet.

– Thump!

Caught in the slash, Kim Hyun’s form was flung far away. The delayed windstorm swept over Raven and Lorraine.

Raven’s ponytail fluttered fiercely.

“Crazy.”

The fight had begun. A slash that easily shattered several trees charged forward, and

Raven cursed as he charged.

Lowest-level magic, Mana Slash. Even Lorraine, who hadn't entered the realm of magic, knew of it.

Its power was out of this world, delaying her judgment.

Qi wrapped around the sharp edge of his spear. With a snap of his wrist, the spear thrust forward. It was textbook spear technique.

– Clang!

As if it was expected, the sword intercepted the trajectory of the spear. The blade, similarly wrapped in Qi, blocked the spear and tangled with it.

– Crack! Clang! Crashing…!

The spear and sword repeatedly struck each other, wearing down the Qi.

'Damn, what is this.'

Spear technique against swordsmanship.

Raven, too, hailed from a prominent family, having already proven his talent upon entering Shio-ram.

He had confidence in his spear skills. From a very young age, he had wielded a spear. He could proudly say his life had been lived with a spear.

The spear was blocked by the sword. It wasn't about the superiority of spear technique over swordsmanship, but his own spear skills being obstructed by swordsmanship.

The direct yet adaptable spear was shot down by the fluid movements of the sword technique.

– Shhh

Of course, he wasn't completely suppressed. In this close encounter, the advantage was Raven's.

The tip of his spear flicked away the sword and lunged. Lee Hayul twisted his head. The narrowly dodged spear grazed his cheek.

This pattern repeated during the brief clash.

The problem wasn't that.

– Crashing!

Arms clashed, shaving each other down. Before the arms broke, the Qi that enveloped them wore away first.

…His own Qi being shaved away. Raven's face sank into astonishment.

Spear skills. To not overwhelm was shocking. Talent and all that, he got it. He had heard about substituting sight with detection abilities, but to be overpowered in a spear fight by a blind man was hard to describe.

The intensity of Qi. He was being pushed back. It was evident at a glance. When Qi collided, his own was shaved away more.

What did that mean?

It meant that the 20 years' worth of mana he had cultivated, the Qi techniques he had trained in, were being pushed back by Lee Hayul's month-old mana and Qi techniques.

'Oh… '

This was maddening. Raven let out a hollow laugh, twisting the shaft of his spear. The sword followed the changed trajectory of the spear.

As Lee Hayul twisted his waist, the sharp tip of his sword narrowly missed his clothes. Lorraine, who had burrowed in from the side, swung her sword.

Lee Hayul stepped back to regroup his sword. 2-on-1. And Kim Hyun, sent flying by the Mana Slash, would soon join.

'Raven.'

It was a bit overwhelming. His yet unstable senses made for clumsy responses. In fact, in a brief moment, wounds appeared here and there on his body.

Although invisible, the original narrative described them as oozing red particles.

Spear against sword. Difficult to respond due to the distance. The spear never allowed for a gap, even for a moment, during its skilled maneuvering. It was overwhelming to close in.

'Lorraine.'

A support major. Yet, she fought as if combat was expected, wielding her sword. On her own, she could be dealt with quickly 1-on-1. But Raven wouldn't let her be.

'Kim Hyun.'

The leader of the group. The one who asked for his name and apologized. Probably the most skilled among them.

Raven was already a challenge, but facing all three together would be difficult with a sword.

With a sword.

I poured mana into the hilt I grasped. The trembling blade soaked up tremendous Qi. Clenching my teeth, I swung the sword widely forward.

Mana gained from the elixir. By now, I had enough to engage in combat properly.

There was still a portion yet to be assimilated. Even at this moment, the unassimilated portion responded.

– Crashing!

Scattered Qi struck ahead. Raven withdrew, and Lorraine, too slow to dodge, received a minor cut on her arm.

"Ugh."

I widened the distance. Regulating my breath, I spread my senses beyond.

Past the torn earth, Kim Hyun with a hardened face was rushing back.

'3-on-1.'

The situation was disadvantageous. The other two also adjusted their pace, keeping their distance as they acknowledged Kim Hyun's return.

They seemed intent on forming a triangular formation to encircle me.

Lee Hayul soothed the mana within and took a deep breath. The pure mana moved obediently at the will of its owner.

Kim Hyun closed in from the front. Pure Qi twined around his sword. The blade etched a clean trajectory.

Impressive swordsmanship.

Watching him, Lee Hayul raised his leg and stomped down hard.

– Boom!

The earth heaved around Lee Hayul's leg, and thick walls of dirt rose.

'Magic!'

Once again, a shadowless spear technique and a high-speed incantation that was difficult to anticipate. Kim Hyun admired and swung his sword. The dirt wall was cleanly scored by a straight trajectory.

Lowest-level magic

[Mana Slash]

The dirt wall was cleanly split by the oncoming slash. Parallel casting. Kim Hyun's sword intercepted the Mana Slash.

– Crashing…!

This time he had anticipated the magic. He managed not to be tragically sent flying, but pushed it back instead.

A power unfit for the lowest-level. But he could block it. With that thought, he pushed more Qi into the attack.

However, Kim Hyun misjudged.

Lowest-level magic

[Mana Slash]

The original lowest-level magic wasn't outstanding in power, but rather it was an efficient spell that allowed rapid fire.

Another slash flew in… three of them. Kim Hyun gasped and hurled his body aside.

Three slashes tore through the ground. The scars they left were as if a giant beast had swung its claws, causing his skin to crawl.

The gap after using magic. Raven and Lorraine aimed for that moment, targeting each flank.

Calmly, Lee Hayul gripped his sword. Once again, the mana within stirred.

Thump! This time without leaping, the ground rose, blocking Raven's path.

'Is another slash coming?'

Raven pondered inwardly. It was due to the sequence just seen. The magic that made the ground surge, followed by the Mana Slash that struck just before breaking through.

A moment's ponder was all it took. During that, Lee Hayul turned and stamped towards Lorraine.

Lorraine grimaced and thrust her sword with both hands. The sharp sword tip split the air.

He truly felt it. The split air circled his ears.

The sword that thrust forward. The burning Qi on top of it was felt.

Lee Hayul exhaled. He sharpened his senses. Suddenly, blood trickled from his nose.

The senses had become extremely acute during the fight. Still clumsy, but now decent enough to use.

A strange sensation.

I couldn't see anything, yet I could feel.

It was mystical that the world could be perceived by mere sounds, the outlines of mana, the touch on the skin.

I extended my sword forward.

Sword met sword. Huh? Lorraine let out a gasp.

It wasn't simply deflected. Lee Hayul's sword flowed naturally over the other's blade, like smooth-flowing water.

– Crack!

A discord. The abruptly changed trajectory struck upward. The sword left her hands. Both arms flung open wide.

The twirling sword soared through the sky. Lorraine watched her weapon, floating like a bird in the air.

'Oh.'

The difference in talent. It was being keenly felt. He was from the Ipchun class. He hadn't interacted with Lee Hayul, but he had experienced his abilities through duels firsthand.

The victory over a combat major in a duel. The match that had changed the subtle view of him, despite his special admission.

Though he had seized the victory by exploiting carelessness, it wasn't a reason to belittle his abilities.

But at that time, his level was comparable to Lorraine's. After all, Lorraine was a

student of the secondary, not the combat, major.

Back then, they were comparable. So, naturally, he thought he had a chance to win. It was 3-on-1. He thought it was obvious they would win.

Now, he was almost suppressed in nearly one strike. The reality hadn't fully registered.

During these thoughts, something cool jabbed his forehead.

Crunch! It wasn't gentle. The sword blade that thrust in was rough, like splitting a watermelon.

'One.'

Lee Hayul counted coldly to himself.

CHAPTER 48
THE TOWER OF GROWTH (3)

The sword that punctured the head conveyed a sensation.

It was unpleasant. The pain was greatly reduced, but the unpleasant sensation of killing a person was vividly transmitted through the hilt.

'One.'

Lorraine's form scattered into a cluster of light.

Without a moment to consider, I immediately swung my sword.

Clang! A rough recoil pushed my body back.

"Tch!"

Raven charged forward with his spear leading, and Kim Hyun, having recovered from the slash's aftermath, approached.

I had disposed of the small fry, but the real challenges, those two, remained.

I steadied my breath. I drew my sword against the thrusting and slicing spear and sword.

– Zzzzzzt!

The clearing was already in chaos. Weapons imbued with slashes and Qi were swung, leaving long scars on the ground and bursting in various places.

Trees nearby were severed and rolled across the ground. With this level of commotion, it wouldn't be long before other cadets gathered.

I had to end this quickly.

Kim Hyun couldn't afford such thoughts.

It was absurd. That was what he thought.

Raven Est. Though from a different academy, he was a friend often entangled with Kim Hyun due to their families' good relations. They had frequently dueled and practiced combined attacks by hunting monsters together within the dungeons.

And there was Lee Hayul, fending off their combined assault head-on.

Of course, it wasn't perfect. Pssht! Red particles burst from a slash across the shoulder. His whole body was littered with such wounds.

His movements were excellent, but there were awkward aspects in places.

He had been blind even before his awakening, they said.

Kim Hyun considered it 'blindness' that he must overcome through effort. No matter how much one compensates sight with detection abilities, it can't match the eyes that capture the ever-changing world.

Just one month. He marveled at reaching such a level in this time.

Skkkrt! Red particles burst from a shoulder.

"Kek!"

It was Kim Hyun's shoulder. In The Tower of Growth, pain was greatly reduced, but Kim Hyun was struck by more than just physical pain.

Raven, too, grimaced and recoiled as a distinct cut marked one of his arms.

In contrast, Lee Hayul stepped forward. His body was riddled with wounds. Scars etched everywhere, and some bleeding cuts where blood particles flowed.

In the early stages of their combined attack, he was hard-pressed to defend. Defending head-on, but continuously suffering wounds as defenses were breached.

Now…

‘We’re being pushed back.’

Raven with his thrusting spear, Kim Hyun with his swinging sword… gradually I began to respond. My attacks were increasingly blocked, and successful strikes dwindled.

In this very moment, my skills were growing exponentially. Clumsy actions were becoming refined.

In this short instance.

– Kwoooong!

My leg raised high slammed to the ground. Compared to before, twice the colossal noise accompanied spider-web-like fractures on the earth.

Rumble rumble- The ground shook roughly as thick spikes of dirt and stone shot up.

Kim Hyun swung his Qi-laden sword. Following a straight trajectory, the shooting spikes were cleaved midway.

As fragments scattered through the air, a streak of light flashed on one side of Kim Hyun’s vision.

‘This…!’

Kim Hyun’s eyes widened as he dodged the base of an unsevered spike, and a blue electrocution strike flew toward him.

– Zzzzt!

“Kugh…!”

The electrocution that struck his ankle spread throughout his body. Kim Hyun clenched his teeth.

The damage wasn’t severe. He was wrapped in Qi, and the magic was weak to begin with.

Raven, brushing off spikes in haste, leapt towards Kim Hyun. Anyhow, an opening

had formed, and he moved to compensate.

The expectation was wrong.

Lee Hayul charged, not at the electrocuted Kim Hyun, but at Raven.

An unexpected move. But Raven's body naturally thrust forward with the spear. A stabbing born from experience melted into his movements.

Lee Hayul also thrust his sword. The blade and spear clashed, and his sword took flight. His figure vanished momentarily.

Craaack! Suddenly, Lee Hayul, who had burrowed below, gripped the spear tightly.

'Ah.'

This is bad—

Before the thought completed, reflexively wrapped Qi around his abdomen burst forth. His waist bent at a right angle.

"Gack…!"

Oxygen was forcibly ejected from his lungs. Raven, not giving up despite the gap, extended his Qi-wrapped hand.

The method of dealing with an opening when a spearman gives an inch. He had learned it exhaustively.

– Bang!

"…!"

But Lee Hayul was quicker.

Qi exploded. Before the hand could even reach, Lee Hayul's fist, pounding the ground, struck Raven's abdomen again.

This time, no sound came out. Instead, the chilling noise of flesh being crushed and bursting could be heard inside the body.

Even now, Lee Hayul's arm didn't stop.

His Qi-filled fist brutally hit the abdomen, solar plexus, and philtrum in succession. Consciousness, already fading, was kicked further away.

'Damn it all.'

Raven spat out a cluster of blood-colored light as he cursed inwardly. Damn it, he joined to earn some points, and now look at this situation.

Lastly, he saw the fist approaching right before his face.

– Bang!

The unpleasant sensation of smashing bone and mashing flesh was transmitted up the fist. Raven's face caved in, and his body slumped.

'Two.'

Quick footsteps approached from behind. Lee Hayul released the spear and grabbed the collapsing Raven's wrist, swinging it.

"…!"

Kim Hyun's eyes bulged.

Skkkrt- The half-severed body of Raven, not yet scattered into light, was bisected by the sword.

It was perfectly exposed, easy to grab. He swiftly extended his Qi-filled hand and grasped the sword.

Crack. The Qi around his hand was sliced away. No matter how solid Lee Hayul's Qi was, if he kept holding on, his hand would be severed.

Before that, Lee Hayul extended his empty hand. Mana held in his grip swiftly sped away, forming the spell.

Mana Slash. The composition of the spell was incredibly simple.

With a few modifications and additions to the existing spell. The original and the added spell interlocked somewhat properly.

Since the base of the magic was simple, even a novice like me could make these adjustments.

Lowest-level magic

[Mana Slash: Barrage]

The spell in my grasp erupted. A barrage of slashes tore through the body turning into light and surged towards Kim Hyun, standing right before me.

'I can't dodge it.'

It was too late to dodge. Even if I threw my body aside and abandoned the sword, it would be the same.

Kim Hyun's decision was quick. He drew all his mana and covered his body with Qi. Over it, he pulled his sword to block.

'Hah… '

He felt it instinctively. I can't block this.

Despite the intuition, he moved, but the ominous premonition did not fade.

Time slowed down. Kim Hyun felt it, but regretfully his body couldn't speed up to match his thoughts.

I won't be careless. That was the thought he had going in, but even that was arrogance.

He had judged Lee Hayul's level by his own standards.

And now, the consequence was bearing down.

'Certainly.'

Kim Hyun remembered his father's words.

The world is vast, he had said. In the broad world, go to Shio-ram to see the geniuses gathered.

'The world is vast.'

Contrary to his expanded thoughts, his vision narrowed as slashes covered it up.

* * *

Mana Slash.

A magic at the very bottom tier of the hierarchy, so simple it's unmatched.

I had made a slight modification.

Instead of just one going out, I changed it to send out four or five at a time—a simple task.

The discordance between the spells occurring through the process. I only needed to hold onto it a bit. Honestly, as long as the power was guaranteed, the rest could be tuned and used as needed.

– Crashing!

Multiple slashes pushed against each other, razing the area of the clearing. Far from clean, the ground of the clearing was torn as if it had been scratched indiscriminately with a chainsaw.

Kim Hyun's presence vanished in a moment. Beyond the remnants of the scattered magic, scattered mana was felt. It looked like the light clusters that had erupted when Lorraine and Raven were disqualified.

It didn't take long for the scattered mana to settle.

With the sound of the wind and touch, I felt the devastated clearing. I stood atop it and steadied my breath.

– Ding!

The experimental watch on my left wrist suddenly produced a notification.

…There was no feature to read the content to me. No hologram either. I didn't even know how many points I'd earned for catching the cadets.

Nevertheless.

'…Did I win?'

I won. Me. 3-on-1? And weren't two of them notably skilled from the combat major?

I murmured blankly to myself.

Honestly, I had no special thoughts when I let go of spatial perception and opened up my senses. Even when I focused on mana affinity, I didn't have any particular thoughts.

Just thought I might as well do something. I tried it out with a light thought that maybe it's okay to do this.

When being chased. To be frank, I thought it was all over, and yet I had the thought to gain something before I went down.

I fought prepared to possibly win, but I never thought I would actually win.

'Why did I win?'

I sank into contemplation. I had quite a few injuries from the fight. Clumsily dealing with the healing magic and deep in thought.

Me winning. It's strange.

When I first came to this world and pondered growth, I gave up on the original… the game-like growth curve right from the start.

Games are different from reality. A fact well known by anyone who isn't a lunatic unable to distinguish between imagination and reality.

You don't die in games. If hp hits 0, the character disappears, and you just create a new character to start again.

Here, death is the end. There is no next. Well, in the original world, death is the end

too.

I had no reason to be afraid in games. Just push forward whether it works or not, and if it doesn't, just start over with a new character.

That's not how it works in reality. I couldn't recklessly consume Hidden Pieces like in the original. I couldn't rampage around every which way.

It's obvious. That's why I gave up on the freakish growth.

The first ascent event. In the first round, I was disqualified without much resistance. Up until the 8th round, I had moderate success, but sometimes unluckily disqualified.

From the 9th round, when I put aside the 'good deeds,' I saw more success. Especially in the 11th round, I achieved freakish results.

The current performance, it seemed, was much quicker.

The duel with Aidan. A victory gleaned by exploiting his carelessness, rather than my abilities. That I could understand.

But now…

Despite receiving many injuries and consuming a large amount of mana, I still managed to knock down three cadets who were all out to get me, even with my spatial perception sealed.

'Why?'

I hadn't consumed any Hidden Pieces. I hadn't yet reaped any benefits through game knowledge.

Yet, there were understandable aspects.

I received an elixir from Hong Yeon-hwa, valuable and hard to price.

I have three inherent abilities. Along with them, three curses. And while my spatial perception was useless in this battle, it was still there.

Beyond that. My physical abilities are a bit strange. Too good for just consuming one elixir.

'…The blessing of growth.'

The fundamental blessing of growth bestowed on Shio-ram cadets. And the additional blessings of growth granted to special admission students.

The blessing of growth that aids in the activation of senses and growth of mana affinity, applied inside The Tower of Growth.

There's more. Intuitively, I thought of something else.

Beyond those three, there was definitely something else accelerating growth.

'Surely… '

Some other thing—

The sound of rushing wind approached rapidly. My senses, pierced through by my thoughts, swiftly turned my head.

– Swoosh!

A mana arrow shaped like a projectile grazed my cheek, piercing the thick tree on the other side. An attack that would have been nearly fatal had it hit the head straight on.

'Ambush.'

I activated my body into a fortified state, preparing for the next attack.

From beyond where the mana came. Several presences began to approach swiftly with my expanded senses.

'…Right.'

The disconcerting surprise of an unexpected victory washed away. The previous calm reclaimed its place.

‘It’s not over yet.’

I won 3-on-1. But that didn’t change the fact that there were still plenty of cadets.

Some curious like Kim Hyun, others like Raven and Lorraine aiming for points.

There must be well over five hundred of them.

I steadied my breath and stamped on the ground. Tap tap tap! Mana arrows impaled the ground where I originally stood.

As I dashed in the opposite direction of the pursuit, the chasers sped up as well.

I had run only briefly, but already the number of those chasing me began to increase. It seems the recent commotion exposed my location properly.

Not even a day of the five had passed.

I had no intentions of being disqualified gracefully.

* * *

A spark ignited. A tiny spark. A faint gust could have easily scattered such a small spark.

– Woosh!

Then it suddenly blazed up. The flame spread wildly, turning into a Gop-hwa, devouring everything around.

The wave of flames, like a storm, swept through everything in all directions. The unceasing flames eventually concentrated back to a point as if rewinding time, becoming a small spark once again.

“Huff…”

The spark turned into a sword. Holding the sword, Hong Yeon-hwa exhaled a light sigh.

Inside The Tower of Growth. The amplified blessing of growth.

Rather than just aiming for points, some choose to stay here for growth.

That was also Hong Yeon-hwa's purpose.

And there was another reason.

"Where is Hayul…"

Hong Yeon-hwa slumped her shoulders.

Day two of the ascent.

She still hadn't even caught a glimpse of the person she was searching for.

CHAPTER 49
THE TOWER OF GROWTH (4)

While the first-year cadets are undergoing their trials within the Tower, it is not as if the professors are simply idling by.

They are already gathered in one place, monitoring the students' trials via holograms and preparing for any unforeseen circumstances.

Of course, since it is inside the Tower, the likelihood of something happening is slim, but it's a matter of formality.

Additionally, although they will receive the data later, evaluating and scoring the students' trials in real-time as they happen is also part of their duties.

Among the numerous holograms floating in the center, a significant number are focused on the same location.

The eye-catching special admission student with outstanding looks and perpetually closed eyes. Also, the student with a whopping 1,000 points hung around his neck.

In other words, he's everyone's target.

The environment has made it so. The intentions of the Principal might be unclear, but it was his decision to put such a bounty on the special admission student's neck.

The professors in charge of the first year honestly did not have high expectations for Lee Hayul.

Given the situation where he was the target of the majority, they did not think he would achieve anything significant.

It was a logical assumption, by all means.

"Oh…"

Lee Suyeon, who had first questioned the disadvantages set for the special admission student, now exclaimed in awe, her mouth agape.

“He’s really flying about.”

The expressions varied among the nearby professors, but they all shared similar feelings of surprise.

In the giant hologram, as Lee Hayul flicked his hand, space seemed to ripple, and several blue arrows appeared out of thin air.

The blue arrows traced their path as they were shot out. Projectiles flying towards Lee Hayul were successively shot down by the blue arrows.

“Magic arrows… Although they are simple, the casting speed is ridiculously fast. And all that with shadowless chanting.”

“The control is excellent. Every projectile is moving as intended.”

The standard for magic is self-hypnosis through incantations. It’s cumbersome, and direct manipulation of mana for casting is possible, but such cases usually result in lower output than incantations.

However, in the display, Lee Hayul, using shadowless chanting, demonstrated output beyond standard despite the impossibly fast speed.

“It’s not just magic.”

Albert, the professor in charge of the Gogu class, murmured.

Two cadets were approaching Lee Hayul, combat majors each holding a spear and a sword.

One and two. Naturally, the one being subjected to the combined assault was at a disadvantage.

“…It’s not just the magic that’s surprising, but the martial arts too.”

Three figures entangled. Legs scraping the ground and arms clashing. At the end of the brief skirmish, one figure was violently thrown out.

It was the cadet who had been holding a spear. His arm hung limp, and the spear he held just moments ago was nowhere to be found.

Lee Hayul firmly gripped the spear and moved his legs. His lower body followed, and then his upper body, as the spear traced countless paths.

The cadet with the sword was helplessly pushed back. Blood-colored light splattered everywhere.

Just as the spear was about to pierce a neck, an attack from a cadet who had barged in interrupted the finish, and a distance was created.

“He’s skilled. He has clearly become quite familiar with combat.”

Everyone had not expected Lee Hayul to perform significantly. ‘Perform’ is even a strange word to use.

He was just a young superhuman who had just begun to grow, and expecting him to excel was a wishful thought.

The second day of the ascent.

Lee Hayul, who had been pursued since midday of the first day, had not yet been disqualified.

In fact.

“Basic combat major three, skilled three, advanced two. Basic support major one, skilled two. Skilled craft major one, skilled magic major one? Wow.”

A total score of roughly 600 points.

Far from being disqualified, he remarkably caused the disqualification of more than ten cadets himself.

More than just a stroke of luck, he was facing multiple opponents charging at him.

“Hasn’t he already earned more than his original share? Wow, 600 points could already secure a nice artifact.”

Kim Suyeon whistled upon checking the cumulative score.

600 points. A score difficult to earn even with five days' worth of effort. That much score is more than plentiful.

"Both magic and martial arts are jackpot-level?"

"Just one month in and he's this good… The Principal was right."

"Is the high score meant to induce challenge? Should we call this deep trust…?"

The topic of conversation all around was Lee Hayul. It was only natural. Everyone had witnessed such a spectacle.

Even just now, they had seen his ability to break through a combined assault of numerous cadets and escape.

Moreover, as the battles repeated, they couldn't help but express their admiration for the rapid growth of his skills.

Everyone held a mix of astonishment and admiration for Lee Hayul, as well as expectations for his future.

'Huh?'

Among them.

'Why is he fighting so well?'

Liana Velus blinked her eyes, swallowing her question.

Strictly speaking, Liana had not been heavily involved in Lee Hayul's education.

She had helped him get started with mana and aided him a bit in adapting to it. At the same time, she had assisted in his introduction to magic and taught him a little more.

That was all. Helping with the introduction was merely to lay the foundations a bit faster and safer.

She hadn't taught him to fly about so skillfully.

There was someone else who had taught him.

Liana turned her head. Atra Clyde was present, even though she was not in charge of the first years.

"Exactly what did you teach him?"

"What are you talking about? I hardly taught him anything."

"Even after seeing that?"

Liana pointed to the hologram with an incredulous expression. Atra glanced at the hologram and shook her head.

"I really didn't teach much. He just learned on his own."

There was no lie. Atra had taught earnestly, but it was up to the student to assimilate and embody the lessons.

This was only her second time attempting to teach, and she had already confirmed she had no talent for it.

That he had grown from her lessons was because the student himself was extraordinary.

Lee Hayul had excellent qualities and grew increasingly diligent with time.

Hence, he had grown like this, and he was still growing now.

Her initial behavior had been a bit puzzling.

Realizing there was a problem with his detection ability, she felt a tinge of regret.

There had been some stumbles compared to before, but it seemed he had resolved the issue, and she felt a slight sense of pride.

Atra's lengthy speech ended. After a moment of thought, Liana blurted out.

“So, your Hayul is outstanding, right?”

“…Why such a reductive summary?”

Atra’s lips twitched.

“You know, your lips twitch every time Hayul is praised? It’s blatantly obvious you’re pleased.”

“Stop spouting nonsense. I’ve never done that.”

“Nonsense? You smile like you’ve received the compliment yourself.”

Atra turned her head as if she no longer felt the need to answer.

I won’t grow attached… Yeah right, as if that’s possible.

Last time, Hayul was in a daze after vomiting, and seeing him like that, it already looked like she had given quite a bit.

Liana shook her head in disbelief and turned her gaze back to the hologram.

On the third day, boss entities will appear. From then on, the focus on Lee Hayul will be dispersed.

Right now, although he had successfully escaped, he sustained serious injuries. If left unattended, he wouldn’t last long before being disqualified…

‘Can he hold on…?’

* * *

‘I’ve done pretty well, haven’t I?’

Leaning against the cave wall, that was my thought.

I had desperately broken through the cadets’ encirclement and fled. Somehow, I managed to shake off the pursuit and hide in a suitable cave.

The first floor of the Tower, the space allocated to the first-year students, is

incredibly vast. There are easily hundreds of such caves.

‘Huff… ’

The coldness clinging to the walls passed through my back. The chill that pierced through flesh made my body twitch.

While I had gained from the abnormally enhanced sense of touch, a side effect was feeling unpleasant aspects even more acutely.

I wanted to detach my body right away, but more than that, there was a desperate desire to rest.

‘It’s strange.’

Strange, and awkward.

So was the information coming through my ears. The sensations felt through touch were similar. The actions of reading the lay of the wind, the movements, were like that.

So was the map drawn by sensing mana. They were all awkward sensations that one would not feel through sight.

Of course, it was just awkwardness. Moreover, I was rapidly getting used to it.

Due to the overlapping blessings of growth, but still, there were parts that were somewhat familiar.

‘Spatial perception.’

Strictly speaking, what I had been doing was an imitation of spatial perception. Now, spatial perception was closed. Therefore, the information coming in through it had disappeared.

The map went dark. It was as if my eyes were closed. So I used hearing, touch, and mana to collect information and draw a map.

It’s unstable. There are many gaps, and the majority of it lacks precision. But it’s somewhat similar to spatial perception.

In fact, spatial perception provides me with too much unnecessary information. Even after filtering, ultimately, there's a lot of useless data.

A whole space is observed to perceive information. Even if filtered, there's bound to be an abundance of it.

The information I'm bringing in now is all helpful. In fact, in the aspect of 'combat,' I've come close to a similar level.

Of course, even so, spatial perception is still more comfortable and superior.

'Hmm… '

I moved my hand. My shoulder was stiff, and everywhere seemed to reject orders. My whole body felt like that. With wounds all over, it was strange that I was even alive.

If I had fully accepted such pain… I doubted I could keep my sanity.

I still dislike fighting, and I dislike getting hurt.

Even now, the pain merely tingles, and I detest even that.

'It's not working.'

I carefully ran my hands over various parts of my body. The faintly manifested healing magic seeped in.

It wasn't very effective. I hadn't properly learned healing magic. Healing magic shows good efficiency when paired with inherent healing abilities.

I have many wounds. The pain is just a tingle, but my consciousness is gradually fading. It must be due to blood loss. I've lost too much blood (light).

'I've held out pretty well.'

Today is the second day. Considering the information I've overheard, it's presumed to be the evening of the second day.

Since I've been chased from the first day, I've resisted and fled from the cadets'

pursuit for nearly a full day.

Honestly, I want to lavish myself with endless praise.

Of course, it's not all due to my abilities. As the chase continued, more cadets noticed my trail and gathered, and none of them united with a single purpose against me.

They checked each other, and I saw several opportunities because of it.

If they hadn't checked each other, and just one team alone had charged at me, I might not have been able to escape.

Even considering that, I did better than I could have imagined.

I've disqualified about eighteen. It's admirable, but honestly, a bit disappointing.

Imitation of spatial perception through senses and mana. There were so many shortcomings that I missed many cadets I could have caught.

If my spatial perception had been intact, I could have achieved more.

'I'm getting greedy.'

Suddenly such a thought crossed my mind, and I chuckled to myself. When it was better than expected, I wasn't too ambitious, but now that I've shown a bit of prowess, my greed has grown.

Anyhow, the results were decent.

I didn't consume any Hidden Pieces, nor did I harvest any herbs, but I still earned points. Also, the growth of my skills was quite substantial.

'If I was going to be like this, I should have just charged in until the end.'

I ran away due to something akin to a survival instinct, but now that I think about it, I could have gained a bit more if I had just charged and been disqualified.

There's no use regretting what's past. I shook off the regret and reviewed my plans.

Let's adapt to the rest in the individual training rooms inside the Tower. Will spatial

perception return there?

If it returns, I'll tune it together with the now-amplified senses, and if it doesn't, I'll get even more used to it.

After leaving the Tower… Let's start preparing to go outside. It's about time to really search for Hidden Pieces.

Just a little longer, and I'll return from being a mute petitioner to normal. Even now, holograms were not a big issue, but still, speaking with my mouth is more comfortable.

– Thud

That's when I heard footsteps.

They were approaching this cave. Judging by the simple gait, it was a woman; judging by the rhythmic tapping, she was carrying a spear or a staff.

The total amount of mana was immense. A mage?

'You've got to be kidding.'

A self-deprecating laugh escaped me.

How was I found? After how far I've run? It's ridiculous that my efforts to escape were tracked down so easily.

If it's a coincidence, it's just as ridiculous. Of all the caves, someone chose to enter this narrow, cramped one.

Either way, it's terribly unlucky.

She entered the entrance. The lay of the wind shifted through the cave. Using that, I estimated her physique.

She's about as tall as me. She has a small build. It seems she's a woman.

Her heart is beating wildly. She's nervous. Was it not a coincidence, but a pursuit?

Disjointed information. Amid the approaching presence, an unrelated question crossed my mind.

What happens to my points if I get disqualified willingly now? Of course, the points won't go to me.

Would they go to those who drove me to this point? Split among them? Or to the last one who struck the blow?

Probably the latter. Thinking that, it's almost funny.

If this cadet unknowingly disqualifies me, haven't those who worked hard to corner me just suffered for nothing?

Serves them right.

Honestly, there's nothing wrong with the rules, and by all reasoning, there's no mistake but…

It's just that I'm a little spiteful because of the hardship. My head is so clouded with these random thoughts.

I stood up. My body didn't move properly, but shouldn't I at least put up a fight?

Lifting my drooping arms, I took a stance. Tapping the slowly recovering mana, I prepared for battle.

The presence came into range. With not much remaining mana and not much point in using it, I approached first… Mana? Why does it feel familiar?

"Hayul?"

That familiar voice. Unwittingly, I relaxed the fist I had clenched.

Just like that time, it was a meeting where I couldn't see properly.

Elia Slade. The woman who entered the narrow cave approached boldly and caressed my cheek.

I didn't have any particular thoughts about the gesture. I had become accustomed to

being touched on the cheek. My only thought was whether it was not dangerous in such a situation.

The unexpected part was.

Being stroked in a situation where my sense of touch was outrageously amplified.

‘Hic…!’

A bizarre internal scream erupted.

CHAPTER 50
THE TOWER OF GROWTH (5)

“Hayul?”

That was the voice that had helped me when I was at my wits’ end in the gate terminal.

Elia Slade. The female cadet likened to a chickling, who had been of much assistance to me over the past month.

For a moment, I hesitated.

I was about to throw a punch instantly upon sensing her, but the moment I recognized it was Elia, the force drained from my fist.

There was a reason for it. This was the interior of the Tower, where competition between cadets was permitted, a hefty 1,000 points hung around my neck, and my current state was on the brink of death.

There was no reason not to strike. Classmates or not, this place was designed for us to fight one another.

It wasn’t that there wasn’t any collaboration, but given my near-death state, I held no value as an ally. Hence, collaboration was meaningless.

The wisest thing for Elia to do here was to strike me with magic and cause my disqualification.

The smartest thing for me to do was to attack before her magic could burst forth.

I couldn’t lash out. Elia, on the other hand, suddenly moved closer and reached out her hand. Her hand approached, brimming with mana.

“Oh my. What happened to you…?”

It was a hand full of healing magic. The amplified touch, the soft caress on my cheek, sent an unprecedented stimulus coursing through my mind.

'…Hick!'

I nearly screamed. No, rather it was a sensation belonging to a category I had never imagined, so I couldn't even produce a scream.

The mana from her grip seeped into my cheek.

It was different from the clumsy healing magic I had cast.

Unique abilities in the healing domain, transformed mana, and specialized healing magic aiding those abilities.

Now, perceiving the world through mana, I felt all of it. The energy seeped through the wounds. It felt like the warm sunshine spreading throughout my body, tending to the injuries.

The energy split into two paths as it entered my body.

One stream settled upon the wounds, bolstering my vitality and coaxing my natural healing, while the other led the regeneration of the damaged flesh.

Unique Ability: [Recovery Melody]

Capable of swift recovery but burdensome immediate healing, and a slower, less burdensome recovery amplification.

A unique ability that allows the balanced use of these two types of healing. The owner's skill determined the precision of the application, making it a coveted ability everywhere.

"All these are injuries? Oh dear…"

Elia sighed with pity, increasing the output of her unique ability a bit. More energy seeped into the wounds.

'Wait a minute.'

– Twitch.

“Hayul, even if it hurts, just bear with it a little longer.”

‘It’s not that it hurts… Hah!’

It was too, too ticklish? Soft? How should I put it? If I had to compare, it was close to being ticklish.

But the sensation was too stimulating to be regarded merely as ticklish.

Fearing that I might scream, I desperately restrained myself. Nonetheless, my body twitched involuntarily.

“Right, just a bit more…”

Gradually, the injuries improved. While not completely healed, I had recovered enough to engage in basic combat.

The focus was on immediate healing. I was conscious of my twitching hands as the sting from the wounds lessened.

My injuries were many.

The most common were those sustained from Qi. I had been slashed by Qi-laden swords, stabbed by spears, beaten by blunt weapons, and struck by arrows.

There were injuries inflicted by magic and others by special unique abilities.

Though I had used all means at my disposal to dodge, block, and avoid vital areas, injuries had accumulated.

Superhumans are not like ordinary humans. Their healing capabilities also exceed common levels. Wounds heal faster, and injuries that shouldn’t recover do heal.

However, the enhanced abilities are not limited to healing; the ability to inflict wounds had also increased.

Ordinary injuries might be one thing, but when another superhuman’s mana, another ‘uniqueness,’ rips through the wounds, healing slows. In severe cases,

permanent damage can occur.

The pouring energy ceased. Elia, with a faint sigh of fatigue, stopped caressing the wound and lowered her hand.

“That’s all for now. Any more would be too straining for the recovery.”

You understand, right?

Her speech ended as if seeking a response. Struggling with the sensation and gasping for breath, I fumbled with my lips.

‘Uh-huh… ’

It was hard to speak. I couldn’t because of the curse, and I wasn’t even sure what to say.

As I continued to fumble, Elia seemed to fidget around for a response.

After that, a rudimentary treatment followed.

She took care of the herbs briefly before applying a little to my unhealed wounds.

Over it, she wrapped something soft and bandage-like around and around. My body twitched every time she touched my skin.

I felt an irresistibly intense sensation.

“Ah, tsk. If you move, it won’t work.”

Unable to resist, I floundered like a fish, and Elia sternly scolded me as if admonishing a child.

It was ridiculous, but I had no strength to rebel right then and there.

How much time of endurance did I endure? Only after my breath became ragged did the treatment come to an end.

The wounds had somewhat healed. The groaning and the quivering of my body had drained my energy.

As I lay face down on the ground, panting, a gentle touch reached my head.

“You did well. Good job, so good…”

Her voice was like that of an adult comforting a child. As her beautiful hands stroked my head repeatedly, I felt as if I had indeed become a child.

With time, I had somewhat adapted to it.

Initially, it was simply electrifying and ticklish, but now the previous comfort seemed to multiply several times, melting into my skin.

Combined with the mental fog due to blood loss, the continuous caressing gradually brought on drowsiness.

‘No, this can’t happen.’

Slap slap. I tapped my cheeks with both hands.

Thankfully, Elia’s healing had prolonged my life. Since I wasn’t disqualified, I was now in a position to discuss the future.

I still seemed half asleep. Furrowing my brows, I was about to tap my cheeks again when a cautious touch interfered with my right hand.

The culprit was Elia. For some reason, she carefully caressed my right forearm… precisely, just below the elbow.

“Hayul, are you okay here?”

What does she mean by okay… Oh, my right hand?

I tentatively felt my right hand. Bare skin… felt repulsive from various angles.

Here in The Tower of Growth, when Shio-ram issues the cadet or active wear, it isn’t damaged, but it can be donned or doffed. It seems my arm cover slid down while applying the medicine.

She must have seen the burn scars.

I hesitated with my mouth slightly open, then stealthily glanced at Elia.

I was worried she might find it repulsive.

I wanted to ask, but my mouth was in this state, and I couldn't speak. Plus, I had no smartwatch.

The frustration was unbearable.

I furrowed my brows slightly, then, on an impulse, I removed the caressing hand.

And then I changed the motion of both hands, drawing in the air.

Sign language… these days, isn't it called 'sign language'?

At any rate, I had learned it out of necessity. Later, when my throat healed, I discarded the knowledge, but now I used it just in case.

When I first came to this world, I wondered if I should revert to using sign language again, but thanks to the modern marvels of smartwatches and holograms, I tossed that knowledge aside.

No answer came from Elia. She didn't understand. I wasn't disappointed, though.

I hadn't expected her to understand from the start. It was just an impulsive act, borne out of frustration.

After all, there were parts I'd forgotten since I'd learned it long ago.

In the original world, sign language varied from country to country. As the worlds were different, the systems might be completely unrelated.

Once again, I fell into thought. How could I convey my thoughts—

"Are you okay now… right?"

Elia tilted her head and asked quizzically.

Unconsciously, I turned my head towards Elia. I hadn't imagined she would understand.

Worried that she might have guessed randomly.

I moved my hand again.

“Do you understand… Yes, I know. How do you know… Aha. That’s what you’re curious about.”

Cross-verification complete. She was reading my sign language.

As I expressed my amazement, Elia chuckled. Apparently, The Tower of Harmony even translates sign language, which falls under the category of language.

What kind of structure is the Tower that makes such feats possible? It was beyond me.

“Still, if you don’t know sign language at all, it’s not very effective. I have a younger sibling in the family who has difficulties with their body.”

Ah crap. Landmine.

My face stiffened. I touched on a sensitive topic.

“Don’t look so upset. It’s much better now. Besides, it was only for a brief moment, and now there’s the smartwatch, right?”

Noticing the change in my expression, Elia reassured me it was okay.

Judging by her demeanor, it seemed she wasn’t repulsed by the burn scars. Or maybe she was just not showing it.

“I have three younger siblings, and the youngest sister was congenitally frail. She had trouble seeing, her throat wasn’t good, so she couldn’t speak well… and her hearing was poor.”

Elia continued.

“So, it was really dangerous until she received treatment. Fortunately, she received good care, and there are no problems now. She’s still improving.”

All the while, she kept caressing my right arm.

“Hmm… That’s why you’ve been especially kind to Hayul, I think.”

‘?’

Suddenly, why was she talking about me? As I tilted my head, she stroked it again. I had no reason to refuse anymore, so I passively accepted the touch.

Lately, the people I’ve met have had a tendency to be quite lenient with physical contact.

That included Hong Yeon-hwa and Professor Liana, and now Elia, who was with me. And it seemed the same with a few others as well.

“Because you resembled my younger sibling. The way you’re helpless, just like a drenched puppy when left alone, clueless when helped, pretending not to like it when caressed… And above all, being cute.”

She listed the reasons one by one. But hearing them was incredibly embarrassing.

“So, it’s like treating a sibling, that’s probably why I behaved that way towards Hayul. Sorry if it made you feel bad.”

I shook my head immediately. How could I feel bad? I had received her kindness, so I couldn’t be anything but grateful.

Seeing my response, Elia exhaled as if relieved.

Afterward, while recovering my strength, I had a simple conversation with Elia.

About the time when my detection ability had turned off right after I arrived, how I had been pursued for over a day, and how I nearly fell from a tree where I had fallen asleep…

The conversation, if it could be called that, progressed slowly due to the use of rudimentary sign language. It was more like killing time.

That was when it happened. Besides the sound of Elia’s breathing next to me, there was no other sound until the noise of raindrops reached my ears.

Rain began to fall beyond the cave. What started as a few drops soon turned into a

pouring shower.

“It’s coming down pretty strong all of a sudden.”

Elia, who had been idly touching my head and chatting, looked puzzled and picked up her staff. An array of mana was set up at the cave’s entrance.

It seemed to be to prevent water from coming in.

“Thankfully, with the rain falling like this, a lot of cadets will probably give up the pursuit.”

No matter how powerful a superhuman is, they can’t completely disregard natural environments. It’s natural that tracking becomes more difficult in weather like this with heavy rain than in fine weather.

I also felt a bit relieved by the rain. With it pouring, I could worry less about being pursued…

– Thud

Just as I was thinking this, someone’s footsteps began to approach from afar.

“…Hayul?”

Seeing my face tense up, Elia also appeared to become anxious.

The presence approached right up to the cave’s entrance. It felt somewhat familiar.

And it was a cold and chilling mana.

“Knock knock~”

A clear voice, incongruent with the dreary atmosphere, came from beyond the barrier at the cave’s entrance.

“Do you want to build a snowman~?”

A random remark.

Elia, who had been tense, tilted her head and whispered to me. Her warm breath tickled my ear, giving me a shiver.

“Isn’t that a line from a movie during the Solar Era?”

…The original world naturally existed in the Solar Era.

I hid my displeasure and nodded.

CHAPTER 51
THE TOWER OF GROWTH (6)

I never particularly liked the rain.

While I don't detest it outright, if asked whether I prefer it over sunny weather, I'd shake my head.

Even on days when my mood isn't the best, seeing the gloomy sky and drizzling rain outside only serves to bring my spirits down further.

Still, I do agree that there's a certain charm to it.

There were times I'd sit on the balcony chair, hugging a pillow, and gaze blankly at the rain-laden clouds.

The sentiment I felt now was quite different from those moments.

I couldn't see—only the sound of the rain filled my ears.

Moreover, with my sense of hearing at a level far beyond the usual, my appreciation for it had changed in several ways.

Back then, I would immerse myself in the scenery alone; now, I wasn't by myself.

"Ahrin, have you seen that movie? What was it called… something about a Frozen Empire?"

"Yes, I watched it as a child, but I'm glad the records survived—it was incredibly fun."

"Oh… A movie from over 200 years ago. It's like an ancient artifact. Now that I think about it, Ahrin, you do have a fondness for old things. Like that strange candy."

Elia's… not making fun of my tastes, is she?

Their conversation, strong enough to cut through the sound of rain, reverberated

nearby.

Resting against the opposite wall, Baek Ahrin chatted with Elia, who sat next to me.

Baek Ahrin had appeared amidst the rain with a bizarre joke about not wanting to build a snowman.

When I showed signs of readiness for an altercation, she was startled and raised her hands high to show she had no intention of attacking.

After some back and forth, we ended up huddled together inside the cave—that's the current situation.

The space was already tight, and with us packed in, the sounds bounced around the interior of the cave.

"Elia, did you see it too? There was quite a commotion out there."

"I saw from a distance. It seemed so fierce that I discreetly made my escape."

"It was chaos out there. It's calmed down a bit now because of the weather, but it was an utter mess before."

Baek Ahrin shook her head, lamenting. She had been caught up in the action before coming here.

It seemed there had been a free-for-all involving nearly a hundred cadets.

It was the second night of the ascent, and such a brawl was to be expected. If you think about it, my being chased was essentially a rumble.

'……'

Baek Ahrin and Elia were exchanging words in a remarkably relaxed atmosphere.

Neither had difficult personalities, and thanks to their sociability, they had naturally become friends in a short time.

After thinking for a while, I tapped Elia to catch her attention, timing it right as their conversation paused.

Elia looked over.

I conveyed my question to Elia through sign language.

“Hong Yeon-hwa is probably causing a ruckus right now. The whole brawl earlier started because of her.”

“?”

The answer came back. Of course, I had asked the question intending to get an answer.

I turned my head. The response hadn’t come from Elia but from Baek Ahrin.

I had meant to ask Baek Ahrin through Elia, as I couldn’t speak…

“Did you know I’m learning sign language as part of my education? It’s easy to pick up thanks to The Tower of Harmony’s translation.”

Baek Ahrin chuckled as she spoke.

The heiress of the Changhae clan. Naturally, she would have received proper education, including sign language.

…Would Hong Yeon-hwa have learned it too? I should ask later.

Regardless, I asked another question in sign language, based on the answer I’d just received.

Why was Hong Yeon-hwa going berserk?

It wasn’t strange for her aggressive nature to cause a fuss, but it was curious that it involved a hundred cadets.

Baek Ahrin answered nonchalantly.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I happened to be with her, and when I mentioned that Lee Hayul was being chased by many cadets, she flipped out and charged in, you know?”

“?”

I hadn't expected such an answer. Even Elia seemed puzzled.

"By that time, Hayul would have already been hiding in the cave, right?"

"Yes. When we saw a gathering of cadets, I mentioned it might be Hayul's situation, and that's when Yeon-hwa bolted."

Without listening to the end of the explanation. Baek Ahrin shook her head as if to say how ridiculous the situation was.

So essentially, Hong Yeon-hwa had been baited by Baek Ahrin's bluff and ended up causing a stir?

"Cough cough. Let's overlook such trivial matters. There's something more important to discuss."

Seeing my incredulous expression, Baek Ahrin coughed and shifted the topic.

"How about we team up to take down a boss? With the three of us, the points that drop will be incredibly sweet."

Baek Ahrin ended her proposal and awaited a response. Elia's gaze turned towards me. Perhaps she was curious about my answer.

'Hmm… '

A team proposal. Nothing special about it. Once outside, there are many cadets forming teams.

While sharing points among the group reduces individual gains, it allows for safer and more efficient point collection, so it's not a total loss.

'But why?'

However, why would Baek Ahrin need to form a team? With me and Elia?

"There is a reason. We were informed at the initial briefing that the boss ranks at tier 5. Tier 5 is a bit too challenging for me to tackle alone."

Baek Ahrin expressed concern, waving her hand dismissively.

“A tier 5 is not someone’s pet dog. If we were further along, maybe, but right now tackling it alone could lead to disqualification. So I’m proposing we form a safe team with people we get along with.”

Her point was valid.

Even in the original story, handling a tier 5 at this point was a daunting task.

I turned to Elia, pondering for a moment.

‘What do you think, Elia?’

She smiled and responded to my sign language.

“I think it’s a good idea. Fighting alongside Ahrin could only be beneficial, right?”

She was right.

Baek Ahrin was the top cadet of the 122nd generation. While her combat abilities may not surpass Hong Yeon-hwa’s, her overall skills are ranked higher.

Her versatility, meriting the nickname “Jack-of-all-trades,” is a force to be reckoned with, especially in the company of allies.

It was not only a welcome proposal but one that I would greet warmly.

I lowered my head for a moment, feeling the mana. My mana, clearly superior in purity compared to the surroundings, Elia’s warm sunshine-like mana, and Baek Ahrin’s clean yet chilly mana.

As my mana affinity grew, I could feel mana more delicately. Thus, Baek Ahrin’s chilliness struck me more vividly.

That was one reason I felt averse to this offer.

But it wasn’t the only reason.

The aversion was because the proposer was Baek Ahrin. I felt averse to her.

Why? Because of knowledge from a mere game in the original work.

Baek Ahrin had done nothing to me, yet here I was, feeling averse.

What a foolish thought. I had resolved not to judge people based on knowledge from a mere game.

And now, I was feeling aversion towards someone because of that game knowledge.

I hadn't experienced it firsthand. I didn't know this person well.

'……'

I could feel Baek Ahrin's peculiar gaze on me.

– Nod

After a moment of hesitation, I nodded.

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The third day of the ascent.

Thanks to the mayhem of the first two days, the number of cadets had dwindled significantly.

Those remaining will likely focus on hunting bosses, and a quiet atmosphere of cooperation might follow.

Of course, care must be taken, as a sudden betrayal could occur at any moment.

Faint birdsong and the babbling of a brook reached my ears. It seemed morning had dawned.

I cautiously propped up my upper body. Sleeping in the cramped cave was not as uncomfortable as I had anticipated.

Although lacking items like sleeping bags, a comfortable bed was made by leveling

the ground with magic and replacing the sleeping bag with large leaves.

“Scamper, scamper…”

Emerging awkwardly from the cave, I touched the leafy ground underfoot and heard a peculiar sound.

The originator was Baek Ahrin. She stretched her arms upward, loosening her stiff body. Her broad chest swelled as she took in the fresh air.

The moan, refreshing even to hear, was far from Baek Ahrin’s usual soft demeanor.

I turned away with a strange expression.

I then pondered the boss we would soon be tracking. I had already received details about the boss during the ascent briefing.

“A tier 5 parasitic moth. An alpha specimen, at that.”

Tier 5. In the original story, even a minor attack from a grown player character could disintegrate these mobs, but reality painted a different picture.

If a tier 5 monster were to be released uncontained in the middle of a city nowadays, it could easily sweep away hundreds of people.

And this one was marked as an alpha.

An alpha specimen indicates an individual particularly dangerous even within its tier.

There are many reasons for this. The specimen could be a mutant, far stronger than its standard kin, or empowered by a dungeon’s favor, and so on.

Now, I had to track down this monstrosity, a tier 5 alpha specimen that had emerged somewhere within this Tower of Growth.

In reality, I would have fled immediately, but within the Tower’s confines, the danger was nonexistent. It was a good opportunity to gain some experience.

Having finished stretching, Baek Ahrin clapped her hands.

“Let’s get started!”

Our temporary party leader was Baek Ahrin. Her strength and experience made her the obvious choice.

Baek Ahrin led the way, with Elia in the middle—her combat prowess ranked the lowest among us.

I took on the role of rearguard. I had already informed them of the regrettable state of my detection ability.

We hadn’t been searching for long—perhaps only about fifteen minutes.

“…Wow.”

Baek Ahrin, leading the way, let out an exclamation. Elia followed suit, her expression a mix of surprise and alarm.

Though I couldn’t see the spectacle before us, I sensed it through other means.

The wind blowing in was hot. Every hint of mana in the vicinity was thoroughly consumed by the fire, and patches of flames still flickered around us.

I pressed my foot carefully against the ground. The heat penetrated through my shoe’s sole.

Crunch. The ground sank in. Scraping around with my foot, I found charred vegetation crumbling away.

It was clear—at least this section of the forest was utterly decimated.

‘Just how wildly did they rampage?’

Baek Ahrin muttered with a grim expression.

“They really tore it up, didn’t they…”

Clear traces of Gop-hwa’s havoc.

My right hand twitched. I absentmindedly checked the arm cover wrapped around it.

“If Yeon-hwa tries to kill me over the lie, you’ll have to protect me, right, Hayul?”

‘Me?’

“Hong Yeon-hwa can’t stand up to you.”

When I showed confusion, she replied as if it were the most obvious thing.

Is that how Hong Yeon-hwa sees me?

…Come to think of it, that might be the case.

We passed through the forest, torched by Hong Yeon-hwa.

Baek Ahrin skillfully led the party, and I pushed forward, detecting the surroundings as best as I could with my amplified senses and mana affinity.

We even collected some points by hunting minor monsters.

There were breaks, and we foraged for edible fruits and other sustenance.

After several hours, fortune favored us—we found the boss in this vast Tower.

– Screeeeeech!

– Crack-crack-boom!

“Ah, damn it! That freaking thing.”

And there was Hong Yeon-hwa, engrossed in her own battle with the boss.

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